

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



August 2018

Vol. 123, No. 8

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# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON *A Tale of True Love*

There was a young man, a Brahmin by birth, [who] fell in love with a bad woman in another village. There was a big river between the two villages, and this man, every day, used to go to that girl, crossing this river in a ferry boat. [One day] the rain was pouring down. It was very dangerous to cross, no ferry boat, [but] his heart was becoming mad with love for the girl, so he would go. With the help of it, he crossed the river, and getting to the other side dragged the log up, threw it on the bank and went to the house. The doors were closed. He knocked at the door, but the wind was howling, and nobody heard him. So he went found what he thought to be rope, hanging from the wall. By the help of that rope he climbed over the wall, missed his footing and fell. [T]he girl came out and found the man in a faint. 'How did you come into the house?' He said, 'Why, did not my love put that rope there?' The rope was a cobra, whose least touch is death. [T]he log was a festering dead body. The woman said, 'Why give that heart to a woman like me? Why not give it to God?' It was a thunderbolt to the man's brain, [who] began to weep and pray. 'Oh Lord, this tide of my love cannot find a receptacle in little human beings; it wants the infinite ocean; come Thou to me.' So he became a Sannyasin. One day he was on the bank of a river, and a beautiful young wife, came. The



Yogi followed the girl to her home. The Yogi said [to her husband], 'I will ask you a terrible thing. I want to see your wife.' He came in and the husband introduced him to his wife. 'What can I do for you?' asked the lady. He looked and then said, 'Mother, will you give me two pins from your hair?' 'Here they are.' He thrust them into his two eyes saying 'Get away you rascals! Henceforth no fleshly things for you.' So he went back into the forest, wept and wept. It was all that great flow of love in the man that was struggling to get at the truth, and at last he succeeded; he gave his soul, the river of his love, the right direction, and it came to come to God in the form of Krishna. Then, for once, he was sorry that he had lost his eyes, and that he could only have the internal vision. He wrote some beautiful poems of love. In all Sanskrit books, the writers first of all salute their Gurus. So he saluted that girl as his first Guru.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,  
(Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2016), 1.471-73.

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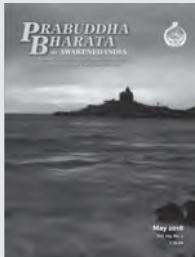
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# Mayavati Appeal

Date: April 15 2018

Dear Friends,

Please accept our hearty greetings from the Himalayas!

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) had always been attracted by the beauty, sublimity and solitude of the Himalayas. During his tour of the Swiss Alps he conceived the idea to establish an Ashrama in India in similar conditions.

The main heritage building of the Ashrama, where Swami Vivekananda had stayed, is now 120 years old. **It is in a dilapidated condition, and in need of urgent conservation.** The original Prabuddha Bharata editorial office, Captain Henry Sevier's cottage and Mother Sevier's cottage, are also in need of urgent repair. **The overall cost for conservation in this earthquake prone, remote area of Mayavati is 3.92 Cr.**



On 23 March 2018, the work was blessed and inaugurated by the President of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj.

We therefore solicit your much needed support to preserve the spiritual atmosphere of Mayavati for future generations. Kindly send a generous donation at your earliest convenience. All donations may be sent in favour of **ADVAITA ASHRAMA** by Cheque/Demand Draft/NEFT/RTGS. Bank details are as follows: Bank Name: State Bank of India, Branch: Lohaghat. **Account No. 10925686743, IFS Code: SBIN0002569.**

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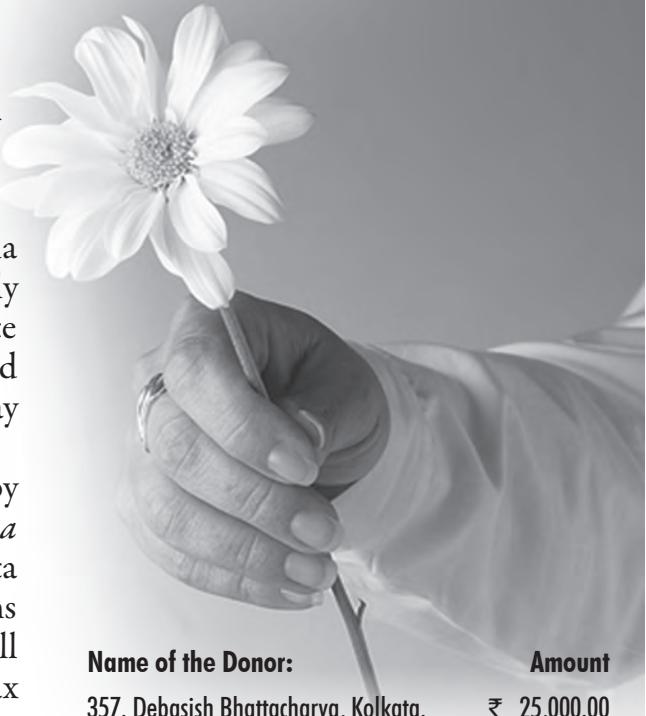
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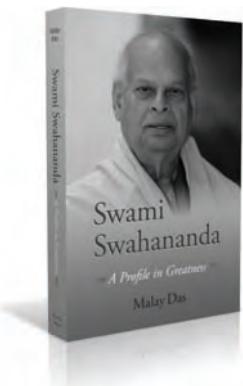
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## SWAMI SWAHANANDA

### *A Profile in Greatness*

by Dr. Malay Das

The spiritual head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California for thirty-six years, Swami Swahananda, a direct disciple of Swami Vijnanananda, worked ceaselessly to spread Sri Ramakrishna's message. He established seventeen centers and sub-centers throughout the United States and has left the Ramakrishna movement in the West a rich legacy.

In this intimate, loving portrait, Dr. Malay Das presents Swami Swahananda as he knew him during the last seventeen years of the swami's life. We witness the guru's compassionate care for devotees and disciples, his ability to love with detachment, and his dignity and grace during his final illness.

Written in a simple, lucid and entertaining style, this spiritual biography will inspire sincere spiritual seekers from all traditions and offer them a glimpse into the wonderful life and work of this great monk and spiritual leader.



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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

*Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## ***Maitrayaniya Upanishad***

August 2018  
Vol. 123, No. 8

### **मैत्रायणीयोपनिषत्**

ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीदेकोऽनन्तः प्रागनन्तो दक्षिणतोऽनन्तः प्रतीच्यनन्त उदीच्यनन्त उर्ज्ज्वाऽवाङ्  
च सर्वतोऽनन्तो न ह्यस्य प्राच्यादिदिशः कल्पन्तेऽथ तिर्यग्वाङ् चोर्ज्व वानूहा एष परमात्माऽपरिमितो  
जोऽतकर्णोऽचिन्त्य एष आकाशात्पैवैष कृत्नक्षय एको जागर्तीत्येतस्मादकाशादेष खल्विदं चेतामात्रं  
बोधयत्यनेनैव चेदं ध्यायते अस्मिंश्च प्रत्यस्तं यात्प्रस्तैद्वास्वरं रूपं यदपुष्मिन्नादित्ये तपत्यग्नौ चाध्यमके  
यज्ज्योतिश्चित्रतरमुदरस्थोऽथ वा यः पचत्यन्नमित्येवं ह्याह । यश्चैषोऽग्नौ यश्चायं हृदये यश्चासावादित्ये स एष एका  
इत्येकस्य हैकत्वमेति य एवं वेद ।

॥ ६.१७ ॥

*Brahma va idamagra asid-eko'nantah prag-anantah dakshinato'nantah pratichyananta  
udichyananta urdhvancha'vang cha sarvaton'anto na hyasya prachyadi-dishah kalpante'tha tiryag-  
vang chordhvam vanuhya esha paramatma'parimito'jo'tarkyo'chintya esha akashatmaivaisha  
krtsna-kshaya eko jagartity-etasmad-akashad-esha khalvidam chetamatrām bodhayaty-  
anenaiva chedam dhyayate'asminshcha pratyastam yaty-asyaitad-bhasvaram rupam yad-  
amushminn-aditye tapaty-agnau chadhumi make yaj-jyotish-chitrataram-udarastho'tha va yah  
pachaty-annamityevam hyaha. Yashchaisho'gnau yashchayam hridaye yashchasav-aditye sa esha  
eka ityekasya haikatvam-eti ya evam veda.* (6.17)

Indeed, in the beginning this universe was Brahman, the infinite— infinite in the east, infinite in the south, infinite in the west, infinite in the north, and above and below, infinite in every direction. Indeed, for it, east and the other directions do not exist, neither do across, above, and below. Incomprehensible is this supreme Self, unlimited, unborn, beyond reason, beyond thought, whose self is space. At the dissolution of all, it alone remains awake. Thus, from that space, it awakens this universe that consists of only thought. By it alone is all this meditated upon and in it all this is dissolved. It is that luminous form that gives heat in the yonder sun, the wonderful light in the smokeless fire, and the fire in the stomach that digests food. For it has been said: 'He who is in the fire and he who is here in the heart and he who is yonder in the sun—he is one. He who knows this goes to the oneness of the one.' (6.17)

# THIS MONTH

**W**HAT IS BABY-TALK? Why do parents talk in a funny and sometimes strange way to their babies? Why do adults mimic the way babies talk? What is the proper way to talk to babies? All these questions are discussed in **The Toddler's Babble**.

In the article, **Truth Swami Vivekananda Taught the US at Detroit—Lasting Significance of His Teachings**, Dr Sukanya Ray, assistant professor and head of the department of political science at Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Government College, New Town, Kolkata; and Dr Anil Baran Ray, retired professor of political science at University of Burdwan, West Bengal; discuss how Swami Vivekananda outlined the course for the truly progressive development of civilisation and human beings in the US.

Swami Kritarthananda, Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, West Bengal, cautions against **The Lure of Power**.

Ruchira Mitra, research scholar, Rayalaseema University, Andhra Pradesh; former head of the department of English, Shadan Degree College for Boys, Hyderabad; and former lecturer at University Post Graduate College, Osmania University, Secunderabad does a detailed examination of **The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies**.

Realisation means different things to different people according to their background, social traditions, religion, understanding, and environment. Realisation is not a mere theory but an accomplishment. Swami Pavitrananda, former Minister-in-charge, Vedanta Society of

New York discusses this in **What is Realisation?** This is an edited transcript of a talk delivered at the Vedanta Society of New York on 26 June 1955.

Meditations on the Upanishads are the class notes on the Upanishads given on Wednesday evenings by Swami Shraddhananda, former Minister-in-charge, Vedanta Society of Sacramento, in 1979. These class notes were taken down in shorthand in 1979 by Cleo aka Satyamayi Anderson and were transcribed many years later with the help of others. The notes are not verbatim and have been edited by Lali Maly and the fifth instalment is being given in **Meditation on the Upanishads**.

Many wonderful nuggets of wisdom contained in ancient scriptures are difficult to understand. In *Balabodha*, such ancient wisdom is made easy. This month's topic is **Adhyatma**. Understanding this popular word is necessary to understand its meaning.

Even if a person sincerely approaches God for one's wellbeing in this world, that can eventually lead to devotion. This is shown in the fifth and last instalment of the story **The Miracle that Brought Faith**. This story is this month's *Traditional Tales* and has been translated from the Tamil book *Arulneri Kathaigal*.

Kieran Setiya, professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author of *Reasons without Rationalism* and *Knowing Right from Wrong*, has written the book **Midlife: A Philosophical Guide**. From this book, we bring you this month's *Manana*.

# ***The Toddler's Babble***

**E**VERYONE LOVES BABIES. One who does not love babies or flowers—yes, they are considered on the same level—exhibits symptoms of some psychological illness. It is normal to love babies. And in this love we get overenthusiastic many times. Our love floods our speech. We fail to find words, quite literally, and end up spewing some gibberish that the baby does not understand; neither do we. The baby only understands love and tries to communicate it in a language she or he has not learnt yet, a language that is more an attempt to convey something than the conveying itself. For the baby this is normal as the ability to articulate language is not yet developed. But why do adults mimic it? One reason is the innate desire in every adult to live one's baby life. The other reason that most parents are less conscious of is to systematically train the baby to learn language skills. And since it is not such a conscious attempt, the process is not quite systematic.

What do parents generally say to their babies? When they want to express their love, they say something like 'bulu, bulu, bulu, bulu, ju, ju, ju, ju'. So, the baby has to hear a large amount of talk that makes no sense to anybody, just because the parents think that is how the babies would understand them. Well, research proves that such a belief is wrong. Baby talk, parentese, motherese, or infant directed speech, is a kind of talk intended to aid language learning of the babies. It should be high-pitched, in a sweet tone, and the words should be enunciated slowly, elongating the vowels. It is very important to use the right words for objects and people. Using sounds like 'bah-bah' for some

object just because the parent thinks the baby will not understand the right word is completely wrong and delays the development of the language

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**Though you might not understand your baby, your baby is focused on you.**

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skills of the child. Imagine if you were learning a new language and the teacher teaches you words that are non-existent in that language, just because the teacher thinks you are not ready for the actual words. How frustrating would that be? That is exactly what happens when most parents use such meaningless words while talking to their babies. It is not surprising then that many adults continue to refer to some objects in their baby-language, or more accurately the language their parents taught them, and a few remain clueless till their death that such words do not exist. This is again how some words gain meanings unique to a particular family.

Parents use cooing and babble to talk to their baby because the baby gets excited while hearing such babble and also responds in the same manner. However, research proves that babies will get the same excitement when they hear their parents talking regular language in a slow, high-pitched voice with elongated vowels. For instance, a mother could say to her baby: 'Baabee, loook heeer iis daaddee!' Recently in a flight, an entire family was busy talking to the baby in the family. However, all they were doing was cooing and babble. One wonders if the baby would not have learnt at least some new words if that family kept on repeating some sensible words, actual words, instead of just crying

'julubulu julubulu jhajhajalajala' or 'ittle-wittle'. Another mistake parents do is to follow the babies' talk and stick on to using the words they use. If a baby were to call milk, 'mummum', the parents start referring to milk as 'mummum' thereafter. This seriously hampers the learning of the baby and the parents should continue using the right words even though the baby responds differently. Eventually, the baby would pick up the right word.

Connecting the words spoken to the baby with actual timings can greatly help the baby understand and learn new words. For example, when the baby is drinking milk, one could use the words 'milk' or 'hungry'. Or, when the baby wants to sleep, one could tell the baby different words associated with sleep like 'bed', 'blanket', 'sleep', 'dreams', and so on. Telling normal words to babies and talking to them when they are just waking up or falling asleep, also quickens their language learning. It is interesting to note that the high-pitched baby-talk is common across languages. The high-pitch is used mainly to draw the attention of the baby as the reflexes of the baby are not quite developed. Research shows that babies are much more intelligent and are quick to develop their grammar skills. Though you might not understand your baby, your baby is focused on you and is absorbing every word you say, and it is important that you talk sense.

This discussion has a deep philosophical premise. A teacher might feel that the unmasked truth, the bare truth should not be told to the student, because the student is probably not ready to receive it. This leads to a precarious situation where most students are unaware of the real, bare truth and are trying to grapple with something that was not true in the first place. Instead, it is wise for the teacher to give the bare truth in an accessible and simple language. Repeated hearing and contemplation helps a person understand even the most abstruse and difficult concepts. When learning a new concept—one that is very different from

what has been taught to a person till then, like the concept of Brahman—the person learning that concept is on a par with a baby learning to speak. If the teacher were to assume that the person would not understand that new concept, then teaching and learning would become obsolete.

Queen Madalasa taught the supreme truth of Atman and Brahman to her babies. She told them in her lullabies that they were pure, immortal, and not the body and the mind. She did not shy from using the very words of the Upanishads just because they would not be intelligible to her babies. And what happened? All that wisdom was absorbed by her babies, and when they turned adults, they started a spiritual journey, bereft of worldly attachments, to realise their true nature that was told to them by their mother when they could not even speak. Swami Vivekananda admired Queen Madalasa's parenting. Imagine what would happen if every parent spoke only sensible words to their babies but in parentese, in a manner that their babies would understand! All babies would learn language abilities at a much faster pace and they would learn everything right the very first time. The possibilities are endless. All that the parent wants as basic values that the baby should adopt, could be taught from the beginning. One could say: 'Speeaak the truuuth! Respect yoour maather!' It is very important that the right concepts, right words, and right language is communicated to the baby, albeit in a manner she or he would understand. Any kind of fear that is created in the baby's mind at this stage of life is difficult and sometimes almost impossible to erase. That is why babies should never be traumatised by harshness or by giving fearful ideas. Of course, it requires tremendous patience and meticulous care but that is what takes to create anything worth mention. A bit of care in minding one's talk to the babies can make all parents proud of brighter children with deep sense of values ingrained in them.

# **Truth Swami Vivekananda Taught the US at Detroit**

## **—Lasting Significance of His Teachings**

**Dr Sukanya Ray and Dr Anil Baran Ray**

'I have a truth to teach, I, the child of God'—  
Swami Vivekananda<sup>1</sup>

**S**WAMI VIVEKANANDA astounded the US with his culture, personality, and eloquence in articulating<sup>2</sup> a new philosophy of religion in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in September 1893. While the leading press and intellectuals in the US recognised that even the most materially advanced nation of the West had lessons to learn in religion, spirituality, and ethics from persons of Swamiji's calibre and genius that India still produced, the orthodox clergymen resented Swamiji's rejection of the Christian doctrine of the original sin<sup>3</sup> in the World's Parliament of Religions as also his rejection in the same forum of the superiority of Christianity over all other religions of the world or for that matter, its finality in all matters that concerned the religions of the world. In the days following the World's Parliament of Religions when Swamiji, in his public lectures in Detroit during February to March 1894,<sup>4</sup> sought to correct the US misperception of India such as resulted from the slanted representation of India by some Christian missionaries, the orthodox clergymen, with axes to grind, intensified their attacks against him, calling him a heathen and branding India—the country he hailed from—a benighted country. As Swamiji himself said: 'The orthodox clergymen are against me; and seeing

that it is not easy to grapple with me, they try to hinder, abuse, and vilify me in every way.'<sup>5</sup>

Swamiji arrived at Detroit from Chicago on 12 February 1894 and the very next day an uncharitable attack was launched on him. At Detroit, he was the guest of Mrs John J Bagley, wife of a former governor of Michigan. As one of the managers of the World Columbian Exposition at Chicago, of which the World's Parliament of Religions was



a part, Mrs Bagley was already familiar with Swamiji and admired him for his performance at the Parliament. Having received him at her house as an honoured guest, she organised a reception in her house in his honour on the evening of 13 February 1894 and invited the leading members of the society including the representatives of nearly all the religious denominations of the city of Detroit to the reception. However, even before Swamiji could utter a single word by way of addressing the assembled guests, a lady, present at the reception, threw all decorum to the wind and denounced Swamiji and India in words unbecoming of the occasion. Swamiji understood that the lady was a 'church-woman'<sup>6</sup> and that the inspiration behind her malevolent and slanderous attacks against him and his motherland came from the motivated clergymen in the US. He did not reply to her words of denunciation, but chose other occasions to give the US a true picture of India<sup>7</sup> as also to warn the US against the pitfalls of her 'current' Christianity, underlining in the process the need for the US to go back to Christianity as preached by Jesus Christ. Such is the backdrop against which the present article gives an analysis of truth Swamiji taught the US about India and Christianity, and in the process it reflects on the course Swamiji outlined for the truly progressive development of the civilisation and human beings in the US.

1

In an interview granted to the press a day after



*Mrs John J Bagley*

his arrival in Detroit, Swamiji responded to a criticism directed against India to the effect that a materially backward country could not be regarded as great by any means. Swamiji explained that India lagged behind other nations in the material sphere because while other nations prospered materially through war and bloodshed, India was disinclined to resort to such means. India was, nevertheless, great as a civilisation because she had the most ancient religion of the world that originated in the Vedas, a religion

that declared way back in the ancient past that religions were nothing but the endeavours of humanity towards realising the infinity of Self. He pointed out that India was great also for proclaiming to the world through an edict of the great emperor Ashoka as early as 200 BCE the duty of all people, irrespective of the religions they belonged to, to profess and practise the essential moral tenets of all religions of the world.

In his public lectures in Detroit, Swamiji pursued the theme of India's greatness as a civilisation, drawing the attention of the US to the following points:

- (a) That India regarded the conquest of self and the subservience of the material to the spiritual as the two greatest marks of civilisation and that India excelled other countries in such characteristic marks of civilisation.
- (b) That though India was repeatedly overrun and conquered by foreign nations due to her weakness in the material

sphere, no adversaries were ever able to defile the soul of India or despoil her spirituality. This historical fact proved that there was something Christ-like in the humility of India: even when she suffered the reverses of fortune, she remained steadfast in her faith in spirituality and through such unswerving faith India sustained herself for ages.

- (c) That being such a country, India had no need of Christian missionaries to preach to her people, for:

Theirs [the Indians'] is a religion that makes men gentle, sweet, considerate, and affectionate towards all God's creatures, whether man or beast. Morally, ... India is head and shoulders above the United States or any other country on the globe. Missionaries would do well to come there and drink of the pure waters, and see what a beautiful influence upon a great community have the lives of multitude of holy men.<sup>8</sup>

The last-mentioned point that Swamiji made, that India as a spiritually charged and inspired nation had no need of Christian missionaries to preach to them, was meant to make it clear to the Christian preachers that he was unhappy with the work that they had been doing in India. His disapproval of the missionary work in India was on the following counts:

- (a) That the missionaries' main objective in India was to convert people to Christianity. As religions were nothing but the endeavours of humanity by different routes to reach the same goal of the infinite Self, conversion was unnecessary and from the point of view of those upon whom it was practised it was nothing but the perpetration of perversion on them.
- (b) That the missionaries had no real humanitarian motive in raising the native people. Any help they gave—financial

or otherwise—was conditioned on the recipients' agreement—cajoled or otherwise—to embrace Christianity. The missionary spirit, that is to say, was mercenary.

- (c) That some missionaries had opened educational institutions to impart education to the poor people of India and that such enterprises did some good to Indians was true, but if they produced some denationalising effect on the Indians in the process of educating them, then it could not be said that their work was all for the good of the Indians.
- (d) That the missionaries coming to India to preach had a vested interest in doing so. It kept the money flowing to them and as professional preachers earning their livelihood, such money enabled them to live comfortable lives in India along with their wives and children.
- (e) That the missionaries coming to India lived among the white people and never or hardly among the natives whom they professed to serve proved the gap between their profession and practice which resulted in their failure to touch the hearts of Indians.<sup>9</sup>
- (f) That, more often than not, the Bible followed the sword in colonial countries such as India and in that sense missionary activities in India constituted 'religious colonialism'<sup>10</sup> in the wake of political and economic colonialism.
- (g) That the missionaries failed to 'read' correctly the minds of the Hindus. Generally happy with their religion, the Hindus did not bother much about the missionaries preaching against idolatry or such other practices that the missionaries considered superstitious. Even the bait of material aid could not make any

appreciable number of Hindus swallow the hook of conversion.<sup>11</sup>

Having criticised the Christian missionaries and having shown why they were not needed in India, Swamiji made a distinction between 'ignorant, hypocritical, or self-deceiving' Christian missionaries and missionaries of Christ (8.217). He said: 'We want missionaries of Christ. Let such come to India by the hundreds and thousands. Bring Christ's life to us and let it permeate the very core of society. Let him be preached in every village and corner of India' (4.198). He reiterated his reverence for Christ and his missionaries when he said on another occasion: 'Send to India missionaries like Francis Xavier, who mingled with the downtrodden people.'<sup>12</sup> Another missionary of Christ of whom he spoke highly was Dr James Long who stood by the people of India in exposing the evils perpetrated in India by indigo planters and courted jail in the

process.<sup>13</sup> Swamiji had great admiration indeed for the missionaries who were true servants of Jesus Christ. He objected only to those who spread falsehoods about India and her people.

## 2

There were real reasons why Swamiji had to expose the Christian missionaries for what they were. They had deliberately misrepresented India and her people to the world causing untold harm to them in the process and he had to correct the erroneous ideas they gave about his motherland. Their main contention was that India was a land of idolatry, immorality, and superstition. As for idolatry, they contended that there were not less than thirty-three million deities that the Hindus worshipped as divine and that Hinduism was primitive in accepting a combination of idolatry and polytheism.<sup>14</sup>

As for immorality, they contended that

*First Unitarian Church, Detroit*



infanticide and burning of widows was a common practice in India. As for superstition, they claimed that suicide by jumping beneath the wheels of the chariot of Lord Jagannatha was a superstitious religious practice of the Indian Hindus.

Reverend Reed Stuart of the Unitarian Church of Detroit, a voice of liberal Christianity, candidly admitted that the books the bigoted Christian missionaries wrote 'abounded in illustrations of the car of Juggernaut and the deluded mortals casting themselves under the wheels; of widows burning themselves upon the burial pyre of their husbands; of devotees torturing themselves in many ways; of aged parents exposed to die of neglect; of mothers flinging their babies into the jaws of hideous crocodiles' (1.344). Having given a list of the contents of books written by missionaries who had a stint or so in India, Reverend Stuart observed that 'whatever good there was was all concealed from us' (ibid.). And that was precisely the reason why Swamiji had to step in and give the undistorted picture of India before the world.

First, Swamiji warned people against reading those '10 cent' books about India, which the Americans and Englishmen wrote after coming back from a few weeks' tour in India. *Songs for the Little Ones at Home* was one such book written by a Christian missionary in India for the 'edification' of the young. To quote one of the 'edifying' songs of this book:

See the heathen mother stand  
Where the sacred current flows;  
With her own maternal hand  
Mid the waves her babe she throws.  
Hark! I hear the piteous scream;  
Frightful monsters seize their prey.  
Or the dark and bloody stream  
Bears the struggling child away.  
Fainter now, and Fainter still,  
Breaks the cry upon the ear;  
But the mother's heart is steel  
She unmoved that cry can hear.<sup>15</sup>

It needs no telling that the 'song' is about the throwing of a baby by her heartless mother into the jaws of crocodiles. Having described such a pathetic scene, the singing poet, in his anxiety to save the heathens, wrote:

Send, oh send the Bible there,  
Let its precepts reach the heart;  
She may then her children spare—  
Act the tender mother's part (ibid.).

Another book of the strain 'Send, oh send the Bible there' was *India and Its Inhabitants* written by Caleb Wright and illustrated with line drawings, the book, first published in 1858, was full of false, calumnious, and sensational information about India.<sup>16</sup> Swamiji regretted that such books ran into editions which meant that they were patronised by a large number of people in the US.

Swamiji not only showed the '10 cent' books about India for what they were; he also cited a few that, according to him, gave a true picture of India. One such book was Sir William Wilson Hunter's *A Brief History of the Indian Peoples*.<sup>17</sup> According to Swamiji, Hunter's book was 'almost the only book published in English about India and the religion and customs of the Hindoo people that can be depended upon'.<sup>18</sup> Another book that he highly praised as giving a true picture of India and Indians and that deserved as such to be publicised more was *India and Its Native Princes—Travels in Central India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal*. This book was a translation of the French *L'Inde des Rajahs*.<sup>19</sup> The original book was authored by Louis Rousselet and was first published in 1876. In this book, Rousselet asks the question, 'Is there a people in the world more tolerant than this good gentle Hindoo people, who have been so often described to us as cunning, cruel and even blood-thirsty?' (568) and answers it himself by asserting that in spite of the West's reputation for civilisation, the West could not stand in comparison

with India with regard to the culture of tolerance. He gives an example of what he saw himself in Benares near the temple of Lord Vishvanatha. A Protestant missionary was preaching there on the errors of Hinduism—he equated it to polytheistic paganism—to the following effect: 'You are idolators! That block of stone which you worship has been taken from a quarry; it has been carved by a workman, and it is as inert and powerless as the stone post leaning against the wall of my house' (*ibid.*). Rousselette observes that the crowd listened to the missionary without showing the least hostile feelings towards him and this showed how tolerance ran deep into the bloodstream of the Hindu people of India.<sup>20</sup>

That such books counted for little in the face of the enormity of missionary propaganda and that the 'benighted-heathen' myth had become ingrained in the nineteenth-century American thinking<sup>21</sup> was found by Swamiji over and again and such findings left him no option but to do his best 'to dispel that national fallacy' (*ibid.*). In Detroit, Swamiji was asked if Hindu mothers threw their children to crocodiles. Though he thought that the question was as absurd as asking an American in India whether the Red Indians of America kept running around in the streets of New York, he still answered it with his usual sense of wit and humour that when he was a baby his mother had taken him to the Ganga, but then he was "such a fat little baby that the crocodiles refused to swallow me"; and he added facetiously, "whenever I feel badly about being such a fat monk, I think of how I was saved from the crocodiles and am comforted".<sup>22</sup>

However, the myth of crocodiles being fed with Indian babies was so deeply ingrained in the American mind, thanks to the missionary propaganda, that even after what Swamiji told them about the absurdity of the thing they heard about, some of them kept asking why only female

babies were offered to the crocodiles to which he indignantly replied 'that probably it was because they were softer and more tender and could be more easily masticated by the inhabitants of the rivers in the benighted country' (1.334–5).

The second most asked question about the 'benighted country' was: Do Indians kill themselves beneath the wheels of Jagannatha? Swamiji answered that it was indeed the custom in India to grasp the rope of the car of Lord Jagannatha and pull it. Perhaps, on some occasion, a few in the process of drawing the car slipped and were crushed under the wheels of the car and this gave rise to a frightened belief in Western countries, no doubt, nurtured and excited by elements hostile to Hinduism and India, that such was the religious frenzy in India on the occasion of the car festival of Lord Jagannatha that people took to suicides on such occasions as a matter of course.

The third question that Americans asked Swamiji at Detroit was: Do Indians burn widows in the pyre of their husbands? He replied that it was a malicious lie to say that people burned widows in India, but in some stray cases the widows burned themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands voluntarily when they decided to join their husbands in the transformation that had taken place. But when they took such decisions, in spite of the urging of priests and holy men not to do so, they were tested as to their fiery resolve by asking them first to put their hands in the flames and only if they still desired to continue with the ordeal, 'no further opposition was placed in the way of the fulfilment of their desires' (1.335). Having explained the so-called widow-burning, he reminded his American audience that it was not the practice however in India to burn witches. The oblique reference was to the burning of witches in Salem in the state of Massachusetts in the US (1.339).

Having explained that India was not really

the land of immorality and superstition, Swamiji took up the question of idolatry to say that the Westerners really suffered from a misperception of this practice in India. Hindus worshipped not the idols or images but only God through the symbols of images. And idolatry was really considered to be the lowest stage of worship in India, practised only by those people whose mental capacity was insufficient to grasp abstract ideas.<sup>23</sup>

Having dealt with the misperceived claim that Hinduism was a primitive religion, Swamiji offers the following arguments to indicate the loftiness of Hinduism as a religion. First, Hinduism is the most liberal religion of the world in terming the struggles of every human soul towards freedom and light as *religion*. As a religion in this most broad and liberal sense, Hinduism accepts all existing creeds, and unlike other religions such as Christianity, never seeks to convert the people of other faiths. Second, Hinduism is basically a

religion of non-self. It holds that all self is bad and all non-self is good and that by living true to the philosophy of non-self, one may attain infinity. The Christian religion is one of self; egotistical in its aspirations, it holds up promises of reward or threats of punishment. It is egotistical also in asking its practitioners to 'do unto others as you would be done by'. This means that, as Swamiji observes, the thought of self always underlies the Christian creed.<sup>24</sup> The golden rule that Christianity teaches its adherents is: 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. The Hindu religion goes further than this golden rule of Christianity and teaches its followers to treat neighbours better than the treatment received from them. By all means, this is impeccable morality and cannot be excelled by any other religion (1.322). Third, Hinduism has a far better theory of love of God than Christianity. In Hinduism true love is absolutely unselfish; it asks for nothing in return. In Christianity, on

*Chariot Pulling during Sri Jagannath Chariot Festival at Puri*



the other hand, as Swamiji puts it, 'the love of God appears to be based upon a theory of "What can I get out of it?"' (1.374). Finally, Swamiji offers the following as a clinching argument: 'I take your Jesus ... I take him to my heart as I take all the great and good of all lands and of all times. But you, will you take my Krishna to your heart? No—you cannot, you dare not—still you are the cultured and I am the heathen' (1.348).

Swamiji reminded the Christian missionaries that many of them, after coming to India, took to cursing the religion and everything of the Indians with expressions such as, 'You idolators, you will go to hell!' The gentle Hindu never returned the compliment. Now that Swamiji struck a departure from such practice of the Hindus and pointed out the defects of *current* Christianity, the ministers of the churches felt aggrieved against him, their indignant message in this being that they had the inherent right to criticise and curse all the heathens of the world but the heathens had no right to answer and defend themselves.

In the context of such unreasonable stand of the ministers of churches, an anguished Swamiji requested them to keep one simple fact in mind: 'If all India stands up and takes all the mud that is at the bottom of the Indian Ocean and throws it up against the Western countries, it will not be doing an infinitesimal part of that which you are doing to us. And what for? Did we ever send one missionary to convert anybody in the world? We say to you, "Welcome to your religion, but allow me to have mine."<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, for the heathens, the Christian missionaries turned a deaf ear to such an appeal. 'You rascally heathen, you must be converted!'—continued to be their stand.<sup>26</sup> But even then, even with such aggressiveness the success rate of missionaries in conversion, compared to non-aggressive religions such as Buddhism, was insignificant, which proved that aggressiveness did not pay much in the long run. The Arabs were

aggressive as were the Romans. While both passed into oblivion, the pacifist Hindu retained one's spiritual glory and identity. This showed that aggressiveness could not help any individual or for that matter, any nation, retain its glory for long. This further showed that, to quote the prophet in Swamiji, 'Everything that has selfishness for its basis, competition as its right hand, and enjoyment as its goal, must die sooner or later.'<sup>27</sup>

Swamiji's lasting regret was that regardless of such truth, the Western preachers of *current* Christianity spent huge money in India, a staggering thirty-thousand dollars, not for people's genuine welfare, but for converting a Hindu to Christianity. Commenting on this mad craze for conversion, Swamiji observes with deep pathos and sorrow in heart that 'if I should become a Christian, I could get a million dollars tomorrow for my school for the poor in India'.<sup>28</sup> To Swamiji, the money spent and offered for conversion was revealing of another crude facet of *current* Christianity: its misconceived notion and attendant lavishness in contrast to the noble work and penury of Jesus Christ who had 'nowhere to lay his head'.

### 3

As a cure for the ills of *current* Christianity, indeed, for the ills of Western civilisation, Swamiji suggested that the West go back to Christ, reversing in the process the aggressiveness and lavishness of its life and character. To quote him:

Reverse this if you want to live, reverse this. It is all hypocrisy that I have heard in this country. If this nation is going to live, let it go back to him. You cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time. All this prosperity, all this from Christ! Christ would have denied all such heresies. All prosperity which comes with Mammon is transient, is only for a moment. Real permanence is in Him. *If you can join these two, this wonderful prosperity with the ideal of Christ, it is well.*<sup>29</sup>

The last sentence contains the key to understanding Swamiji's approach. He did not mean to be unkind in his criticisms of Christianity or American civilisation. Yet if he was critical and at times sternly critical of the aggressive and destructive characteristics of Western civilisation, it was because he wanted to save it from destruction by showing the American people the way out of self to God. Selfishness lay in bigotry of *current* Christianity, in the attitude such as 'be Christian or be doomed'. Selfishness lay in the dishonesty and cruelty of America's social and business world. Selfishness lay in the denial of the dictum 'He that hath shall freely give to him that hath not', in the denial, so to say, of an America, with double the area of India and with one-fifth—then sixty-five million—of the population of India—then three-hundred million—to give aid to a famished and poor India. Selfishness lay in 'every man for himself regardless of his brother man' attitude. Selfishness lay in the ruthless pursuit of the law of the survival of the fittest, in the cut-throat competitiveness and destructiveness of fellow men, so to say. Selfishness lay in living only for one's own narrow self, or, so to say, in the enjoyment of material things of life and in the insatiable love of gain to that end. Certainly, Jesus Christ could not have meant by Christianity selfishness, competition, and enjoyment when he asked his followers to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' or when he asked for forgiveness even for enemies who crucified him. These were the imperfections of *current* Christianity, of Western materialistic civilisation, and of Western standards of character and life to which Swamiji drew the attention of his American audiences and of the American people at large when he gave them a call to go back to Christ. And he did it in the most earnest and sincere spirit of a holy man who meant well and who wanted to be outspoken in the interest

of truth. To quote his ringing words:

I am a rather plain-spoken man ... but I mean well. I want to tell you the truth. I am not here to flatter you; it is not my business. If I wanted to do that I would have opened a fashionable church in Fifth Avenue in New York. You are my children. I want to show you the way out of self to God by pointing out to you your errors, your defects, and your vanities. Therefore you do not hear me praising your current Christianity or your ideals of civilization, or the peculiar forms of character and life that are developed by Western ethical standards.<sup>30</sup>

It would be wrong to think that Swamiji only criticised the US through his Detroit lectures. He duly recorded his appreciation where the appreciation was due. He appreciated the intellect and kindness of the American women as also the freedom and position enjoyed by them in the American society. He also appreciated the hospitals and charitable institutions of the US as also the labour-saving machinery developed in the US to ease the problems of life of the poor and the labouring people. He did not however admire the materialist US, for the all-important reason that material progress alone could not make Americans better human beings.

#### 4

Developing human beings for the better was Swamiji's overwhelming concern. In fact, that is the objective with which he gave the US a thorough exposition of his philosophy of non-self that lifted man from his egotistical self to the infinite Self. Swamiji was realistic enough to know that it was too much to expect that the Americans or the Western people would take at once to that lofty philosophy and live up to it. He, therefore, advised the people in the West to make a harmony between energetic materialistic pursuits and the spiritualistic pursuit of

non-self through the gentleness of a Jesus Christ, an ideal that was characteristic of the East. Join these two, as he said, the energy of the lion, typifying the West and the gentleness of the lamb, typifying the East and bring about the development of a new type of human being. Material power was rampant in the US but spirituality was lacking and with a view to bringing about a harmony between the two and with the larger goal of bringing to fruition a new type of human being that Swamiji envisioned, he alerted the US to the most pernicious aspects of her civilisation. He did so in order that with such alertness the US could get over the negative side of her civilisation and rise to the goal of a fuller life for a *human being* in the fullness of time. ☸

### Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.93.
2. The *New York Critic* of 11 November 1893 eulogised Swamiji's performance at the World's Parliament of Religions in such terms. For a fuller version, see *Complete Works*, 9.434-5.
3. See *Complete Works*, 1.11.
4. Swamiji delivered eight public lectures in Detroit.
5. *Complete Works*, 5.31. Letter to Alasinga Perumal dated 9 April 1894.
6. Swamiji had the following observation to offer about such 'churchwomen': 'These "Church-women" are awful fanatics. They are under the thumb of the priests there [in the US]. Between them and the priests they make hell of earth and make a mess of religion' (*Complete Works*, 5.21).
7. Obviously, Swamiji considered it below his dignity to engage in a verbal duel with a lady on that occasion, but his conviction that he had 'a truth to teach', he, 'the child of God' (*Complete Works*, 5.93) brought out in a short while, the teacher in him to give the US a true picture of India as also to teach the US how to be good Christians and true followers of Jesus Christ.
8. *Complete Works*, 8.207.
9. See *Complete Works*, 8.216.
10. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 6 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985), 1.461.
11. See *Complete Works*, 8.216.
12. *New Discoveries*, 1.375.
13. See *Complete Works*, 8.215.
14. See *New Discoveries*, 1.228.
15. Thomas Hastings, 'The Heathen Mother', *Songs for the Little Ones at Home*, ed. Mary C Ward (New York: American Tract Society, 1852), 243-4. Quoted in *New Discoveries*, 1.222.
16. See A M Caleb Wright, *India and Its Inhabitants* (Cincinnati: J A Brainerd, 1856).
17. See Sir William Wilson Hunter, *A Brief History of the Indian Peoples* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1893).
18. *New Discoveries*, 1.212.
19. See Louis Rousselet, *India and Its Native Princes—Travels in Central India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal*, ed. Lieut-Col. Buckle (London: Hackers, 1882).
20. See *New Discoveries*, 1.224-5.
21. See His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.465.
22. *New Discoveries*, 1.338-9.
23. Swamiji went on to observe that the more perceiving ones however, as they sit before the idol, shut their eyes and try to think: 'I am He; I have neither life nor death; I have neither father nor mother; I am not bound by time or space; I am Existence infinite, Bliss infinite, and Knowledge infinite; I am He, I am He.' (*Complete Works*, 8.210).
24. See *New Discoveries*, 1.337.
25. *Complete Works*, 8.212.
26. *New Discoveries*, 1.213.
27. *Complete Works*, 8.213.
28. *New Discoveries*, 1.213. Having pointed out the 'luxury' involved in preaching Christianity and the money he could have made by agreeing to be converted, Swamiji was quick to add: 'But I prefer to earn the money by hard work, though it seems like the work of a lifetime to get enough to make a start in the work I want to do' (*ibid.*).
29. *Complete Works*, 8.213. Emphasis added.
30. *Life*, 1.462.

# The Lure of Power

Swami Kritarthananda



## Beware of Power!

THE RAMAYANA NARRATES a highly educative story in its last canto. Once a dog came to the palace of Sri Ramachandra seeking justice. The dog sustained severe injury of a blow on the head. On enquiry he told that a brahmana of high birth had hit him in an angry mood. The man was summoned, and he confessed his sin. An ideal king that Sri Ramachandra was, he sought the plaintiff's opinion on the verdict of punishment. The dog humbly implored that the brahmana be made the chief administrator of a certain monastery named Kalanjara. All the courtiers of the palace were struck with wonder at the liberality of the dog and could not check the temptation of asking the reason thereof. The latter explained that he himself adorned that post in his last birth. He was an honest person, pious, and possessed of many qualities of the head and heart. Yet unfortunately he fell prey to delusion and went the wrong way. As an atonement of his bad deeds he had fallen to the present condition of dog birth. Such being the case with him, what could be the

plight of the irksome, envious, vain brahmana who had hit him! The vanity of power and position would throw him all the more into delusion. Hence the request!<sup>1</sup>

This anecdote is an eye-opener for us all. With its practical, penetrating insight into the nature of human mind, it cautions mankind against the dangers ahead. The human species is the greatest and noblest of all creations. But if one fails to value human dignity and remains engrossed in sensual pleasures, if one clamours for power to exploit others; if one attaches undue importance to the bestial law of survival of the fittest through cut-throat competition, keeping up with one's obsessions and envy, then one cuts a poor figure in maintaining a human identity for long. And one would have to face the miserable consequences.

Power-mongering is not merely an individual problem. It has its long roots extended deep into every nook of the world. In the language of Swami Vivekananda:

Each word of power had to be followed by the groans of millions, by the wails of orphans, by the tears of widows. ... There was a time when

at the sound of the march of big Greek battalions the earth trembled. Vanished from off the face of the earth, with not even a tale left behind to tell, gone is that ancient land of the Greeks. There was a time when the Roman eagle floated over everything worth having in this world; everywhere Rome's power was felt and pressed on the head of humanity; the earth trembled at the name of Rome. But the Capitoline Hill is a mass of ruins, the spider weaves its web where the Caesars ruled. There have been other nations equally glorious that have come and gone, living a few hours of exultant and exuberant dominance and of a wicked national life, and then vanishing like ripples on the face of the waters. Thus have these nations made their mark on the face of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dimensions of Power**

The difference between nations is recognised by the difference in their powers. Human status is controlled by power. There is none on earth who is stripped of any power. Power is the force which keeps up one's vitality. Indeed, without power, no work, no dynamism would have been possible. The Vedanta philosophy holds power as one of the essential characteristics of the soul. The Atman manifests itself in a threefold manner. These are called the *aishvarya*, glories, of the Atman and are known as knowledge, power, and activity—*jnana*, *bala*, *kriya*. Just as ego and egotism are not the same, power should not be confused with its ramifications. One cannot do away with the ego, which is an existential reality. When it is said that the ego must be crushed if we want spiritual progress, it actually means that we have to harness the ego, to keep it away from wrong orientations, to whittle down the harmful parts of it. The same idea holds true for power. Power, again, is rooted in the will. Pure, untainted, unbiased will is what is called Atman in Vedanta. The same will, when focused on worldly objects or ends, becomes attached and scattered

in its power. Then it finds expression in domination over others, and may even wreak havoc. This is the view held by the Indian philosophers.

The Western psychologists ascribe two dimensions to power. According to them, the first meaning of power is capacity, trait of an individual. The other is domination. They represent these two dimensions as 'power of' and 'power over'. The German psycho-sociologist Erich Fromm has portrayed the subtle distinction between the above two concepts. His view is that the latter is a perversion of the former:

The ability of man to make productive use of his power is his potency; the inability is his impotence. ... Where potency is lacking, man's relatedness to the world is perverted into a desire to dominate, to exert power over others as though they were things. Domination is coupled with death, potency with life. Domination springs from impotence and in turn reinforces it, for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralyzed.<sup>3</sup>

Thus far we gather that power has both benign and malignant effects depending on the direction of the will. If the will turns to worldly gains, power manifests in domination over others, exploiting the innocence of others, and so on. But when the same will is focused on its creative aspect, the result is a manifestation of the inherent dormant potentialities. Such manifestation can never be harmful to others.

It is a common experience that most people change radically towards the worse when invested with a power of authority. They ignore all their previous relations with others. The behaviour that they extend towards others is far from human. The only aim of most of the modern managers seems to be to wean other people to their own line of thinking by hook or by crook.

People in general try to change the world,

change other people by force, coercion, duress, or any other lowly means. But things get more complicated thereby. An office boss, in order to take revenge on the subordinate, sacks the subordinate through crooked means and gets a replacement. But more often than not, the successor is found to be a worse person than the one before. It is an inscrutable adjustment of nature that a crooked person finds oneself surrounded only by a group of crooks. That is the price one pays for exploiting the innocent through crookedness. Nature pays one back in one's own coin. Patanjali says: 'As long as the root is there it must ripen and result in lives of different class, length, and experience.'<sup>4</sup> As a corollary to this aphorism, it can be said that a person's environment, birth, lineage, and so on, are determined by that person's own actions and that person cannot change the world outside except through a change in one's attitude to work and attitude to oneself. When these are taken care of, the environment automatically changes favourably for a person. But this seldom happens. On the contrary, one thinks one is very clever and none can surpass one in one's cunning. This is a mistake. Man cannot deceive nature. He cannot elude his destiny which is his own creation 'of fault and passion, ages long ago; In the deep years of yesterday', in the poetic language of Swamiji.<sup>5</sup> Every action of his comes back to him with the same potency. Sri Ramakrishna used to say sarcastically: 'The crow, too, thinks he is a clever bird; but the first thing he does when he wakes up in the early morning is to fill his stomach with nothing but others' filth.'<sup>6</sup>

The question that naturally arises in this context is, what prompts people to behave in such queer, inhuman ways after ascending to a high post. To get the answer it will not be enough to float on the surface level. One must dive deep into the recess of human personality to find cogent answers. We shall discuss it now.

### Reasons for Exploitation

The first cause is ignorance of our real nature and potentiality. It is a mystery of human nature that even though the soul is possessed of an immense and inexhaustible source of power like a dynamo, yet one forgets all about it. The Vedanta philosophers account for this anomaly by positing an entity called maya. The word means that which, *ya*, is not, *ma*. They went on to demonstrate a twofold function of this strange entity: covering the real nature of things, *avaranā*, and making things appear as something else, *vikshepa*. Everything in the universe, both gross and subtle, come under the purview of maya. Under its spell one's real identity shrinks and one projects one's infinite power into the worldly perspective. It is through maya that a person forgets one's nature and starts wallowing in the mire of the world through various 'dances of death' expressed in competition, jealousy, power-mongering, and others. One never stops to think that there is no need to run after power like a musk-deer in search of its musk which is in its navel. The source of all power is within oneself, but the human being seeks it outside in the world and tries to dominate over others in one's desperate bid to crave for more and more. At last, like the musk deer, a person dies in one's futile attempt, worn-out and with hopes blighted.

The second reason follows from the first one. It is fear from other contestants in the battle. If the covering aspect of maya bars one from seeing the truth, the scattering aspect produces fear of being overtaken by others. There is no creature that is completely free from fear. Traumatic previous experiences are stored in the memory and under similar circumstances they warn one of the impending danger. There is nothing in this universe that is not fraught with fear. According to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 'all fear

springs forth from the idea of duality.<sup>7</sup> What is the way out of fear, then? Detachment is the only force that drives away this fear. Detachment naturally follows from a clear understanding of the transient, impermanent world. One may fear that such practice will make it impossible to carry out worldly duties. That it is not so is clearly demonstrated by the life and work of Sri Krishna and also a host of kings, householders, and people from all walks of life who attained to the lofty peak of humanity through their detached spirit. Detachment is not the monopoly of monks and sages who form only a minority of the world's populace.

Fear also creeps into our mind from a sense of 'otherness'. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the *Ishavasya Upanishad*, and other Upanishads are unanimous in their verdict that fear arises out of a feeling of a second, and 'where there is the sense of oneness, there can be no delusion, grief, or any such feeling'.<sup>8</sup>

When one becomes free from fear, a confidence comes up on the surface of one's personality. This confidence is not of the nature of elbowing out others or going ahead of others. It is a confidence in the power and efficiency of human nature.

The third cause of exploitation can be traced to an existential vacuum within oneself. This means that due to some unknown reason we get disconnected from the true source of our being. Spiritual people call this source divinity. When this void is created, one becomes frustrated in life and this frustration finds expression through a compensatory device known as 'the will to power'. This will to power is on the heels of the desire to accumulate riches. When the will to power is dominant, a person stops listening to others' views, however correct or cogent. One only values one's own whimsical, emotional, and momentary views.

We now come to the fourth cause for power-mongering. Judging by the nature of the human beings, psychologists have divided humanity into two broad classes: lovers of life and lovers of death. It is the latter class—namely, people with death instinct—that is responsible for all the destructive propensities found in the human being. Death instinct manifests itself in a wide variety of character traits. It might be an unusual attraction toward corpses, but its root goes deeper into the human psyche. Hitler and Stalin were ideal examples of persons with death instinct. Hitler was fascinated by destruction and felt a bestial joy at the smell of death. The person with a death instinct fosters in one's bosom the wounds of insult, ill-treatment, and such other feelings. They are very fond of forcing others because force means the power to kill and destroy. Murder being illegal and criminal, its alternative is to deprive others of their legitimate right to freedom. The other expressions of this trait are humiliating others, taking away others' possession, and studied neglect. When a person with death instinct wields power, one's tendency is to convert all people working under oneself into lifeless, mechanical beings. Such people claim unconditional obedience from their subordinates. Those people with death instinct, who do not get the opportunity or strength to kill others find out a number of alternative devices to subdue others so that no court of justice can accuse them of any offence. These are: to deny hope to others, to refuse to recognise talents in others, backbiting, assassinating the character of the victim, being insensitive to the feeling of others, intriguing against others in an underhand way, desperately trying to prove the opponent insane, forcing the opponent into such mental pressure that one loses balance, humiliating the colleague in front of their subordinates, taking advantage of the

innocence and honesty of the opponent, pitting henchmen against a good person to arouse anger in the latter, and then accusing the opponent of intemperance, and so on.

As a fifth cause, various types of violence can be traced. Violence may be of several types. One is reactive violence. It comes as a result of a reaction to the ill-treatment from others. Clearly this violence is in defence of life, freedom, and dignity. But one point is worth mention here. Unlike death instinct as mentioned above, this violence chiefly aims at preservation and not destruction. Reactive violence is sometimes caused by frustration. Animals, children, and even adults sometimes behave in a violent way when they feel frustrated. Frustration leads to envy, jealousy, and backbiting.

The next form of violence is revengeful violence. It differs from reactive violence in that the former is generally a preventive measure while the latter is curative. It is an attempt to pay back in the same coin after a damage has already been done. But such tendency is of a destructive nature. On the other hand, one who lives a productive life can easily forget injuries, insults that are inflicted on that person. The very process of productive living makes one change one's mentality for the better.

Sometimes the long-standing faith of a person on another shatters due to adverse treatment from the latter. If it happens to a child, the child can go on shifting faith from one person to another for experimentation. But at a mature age this is not possible. As a result, the person either becomes sceptical or starts hating life. The believer and lover of life, when disappointed, turns into a hardcore cynic with destructive tendencies. When such people come to power by a decree of fate, they only become sources of trouble for their associates and subordinates.

Violence finds expression in yet another form widely known as sadism. It is not merely the desire to inflict torture on others. The chief purpose of sadism is to exercise complete mastery over others, to make others helpless objects of one's mercy. Humiliating or enslaving others are just different strokes of sadism.

There are more causes for power exploitation. For our present purpose these five causes will suffice. It is no less a wonder to observe that with the source of all powers within oneself, a person becomes perverted after ascending to power and position. Our wrong way of training in the family since childhood is chiefly responsible for such aberrations. Is there no remedy for such deep-seated problems?

### **Some Remedies**

No problem is called a problem unless it has a solution. For each of the causes cited above there is a specific remedy. But for the sake of brevity all the remedies can be strung into a single factor. If every individual can be trained to live a productive life by switching on to the inexhaustible source of Atman, all the sinister effects of power-mongering can be easily abolished from the face of the earth.

To live productively means, in the first place, to live in close proximity with people who are beaming with life energy, who love life. Such people teach more by their own example than by sermonising or paying lip service to these ideals. They teach the principles conducive to inner harmony and strength; they can give ample guidance in the art of living. Above all, their company helps one establish one's own freedom—not merely freedom from the shackles of social norms and bindings, but freedom to express the inner urge of one's soul; freedom to create and construct; freedom to learn from nature with a spirit unbiased by the thought of others.

Security, justice, and freedom—these three are the means to come in touch with one's life force.

Another way in the search after life is to find the real meaning of our life. When we feel frustrated by the never-ending blows from the world, the lamp of our life seems to have blown off. We fail to relate ourselves meaningfully to life. Sometimes this unsettling condition becomes so persistent that people try to solve this problem by committing suicide. This means to run away from life.

When a person lives an active life, one might realise the higher values of human life through creative work or by enjoying the world through beauty, art, and nature. But there are periods in life when one is barred from all the enjoyment and bliss of creation; when one's very existence is restricted by external forces. Under such circumstances the way in which one accepts the inevitable fate and the subsequent suffering, the way in which one takes up the Cross, the perspective from which one views life, determines one's success in finding out meaning in life. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life. If there can be a meaning in life, there is also a meaning in suffering, and even in death. One can maintain high human dignity even under straitened circumstances. Or one may give in to bestiality in order to achieve the petty ends of daily life. The choice is one's own while the opportunity to attain high moral and ethical values of human life is open to a person.

In the life of every individual there come crucial moments when one has to choose between two diametrically opposite options—between the good and the pleasant, progress and regress, love and hate, freedom and bondage. In the *Katha Upanishad*, the little boy Nachiketa faced this crisis and brilliantly came out successful with one telling blow of right judgement. In contrast, in the *Bhagavadgita*, Arjuna also faced

this sudden crisis on the battlefield and failed to make the right choice between fight and flight. So Krishna had to come forward to convey the right choice of path. But after preaching the whole sermon of the Gita, Krishna said, 'I have imparted to you the most secret knowledge. Imbibe this, and do whatever you feel.'<sup>9</sup> It means the Lord left the choice of path to Arjuna. What one chooses under such circumstances decides one's success or failure in life.

### **Pros and Cons**

We have discussed some of the outlets through which the manifestation of power takes place. We have also tried to find out some of the causes of the wrong orientation of power with their remedies. Power by itself is not always harmful. It is the attitude that matters. Sri Krishna vanquished many demons and devilish people by extremely cruel means. The motive was to establish the supremacy of virtue over vice, truth over falsehood. 'Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood,' says the *Upanishad*.<sup>10</sup>

A person's attitude towards the world depends on how one looks upon oneself. This truth has been laid down by Sri Ramanuja.<sup>11</sup> This statement further leads to an important corollary: What one pursues as a desired end depends on one's attitude towards oneself. To put it explicitly, one who hates oneself will arouse hatred in others through one's behaviour, while one whose self-image is good will treat others lovingly. This principle can be used as a hallmark for judging powerful people.

Another way to judge resourceful people has been beautifully hinted at by Bhartrihari, the king-turned-sage, in his celebrated work *Nitishtakam*, one hundred verses on morality. There he divides humankind into four classes. The first comprises those who do good to others even at the cost of their own interest. They are termed

as 'noble' people, *satpurushah*. Though rare in count, there are people who are ever ready to sacrifice their own life for the sake of others, do good for the sake of good only. People lionise such noble souls for their spontaneous power to do good.

The second class consists of those who are ready to do good to others so long as their selfish interest is not tampered with. They are marked as the 'common run' of people. The major part of the world's populace comes under this category.

The third class, sardonically expressed as 'human devils', includes those who smash others' hopes in order to keep their own hopes alive. One must exercise much discrimination in order to keep such people at arm's length. Otherwise, in their vanity of power these 'human devils' may inflict deep scars of wound in the hearts of innocent people.

Yet this is not all. As if to fill the cup of human misery, there rises on the surface of humanity the ugly head of another class of people. Bhartrihari humbly regrets his inability to define this fourth class of people who go on doing harm to others without any apparent motive for themselves. These people, in contrast to the first class, do evil for evil's sake alone.<sup>12</sup>

We have an inexhaustible stock of stories to demonstrate the miserable plight of people craving for power. Swamiji went to the extent of saying that the craze for power and fame is a deadlier enemy than even lust. Every citizen of the world is aware of the truth, 'As you sow, so you reap'. Besides, the wheel of karma makes every creature reel under its sway. It moves incessantly making one a slave of one's unconscious drives. The inexorable law of karma does not relieve anyone from the king to the pauper, the high and the low, the scholar and the illiterate. If one can keep in mind this truth forever,

one will never feel infatuated when placed in power and position. Swamiji has described this terrible machinery of work in his own style: 'This world's wheel within wheel is a terrible mechanism; if we put our hands in it, as soon as we are caught, we are gone. We all think that when we have done a certain duty, we shall be at rest; but before we have done a part of that duty, another is already in waiting. We are all being dragged along by this mighty, complex world-machine.'<sup>13</sup>

Sage Patanjali has clearly stated in his yoga aphorism cited earlier that a person's birth, longevity, enjoyment, suffering, and the like are decided by one's work. This aphorism, while holding each individual responsible for one's own actions, stands as a warning to those who do not hesitate to stoop low in order to control and subjugate others.

The human being cannot do away with work. It is work that connects one to the world. Again, it is work through which one comes to grief. Then what is the way out? Let us continue with the above paragraph of Swamiji:

There are only two ways out of it; one is to give up all concerns with the machine, to let it go and stand aside, to give up our desires. That is very easy to say, but is almost impossible to do. ... The other way is to plunge into the world and learn the secret of work, and that is the way of Karma-Yoga. Do not fly away from the wheels of the world-machine, but stand inside it and learn the secret of work. Through proper work done inside, it is also possible to come out. Through this machinery itself is the way out (ibid.).

The secret of work is unselfish, uncompulsive, self-directed work. When a person does every bit of work with this spirit, one is never tempted by the desire to dominate over others. Everybody wants to rule over others, to lead others. But very

few are indeed fit to take that responsible role. Only that person is fit to lord over others who is ever ready to sacrifice everything for others. Swamiji warned his disciple Alasinga against this desire: 'Do not try to lead your brethren, but serve them. The brutal mania for leading has sunk many a great ship in the waters of life. Take care especially of that ... be unselfish even unto death, and work' (5.36).

Sri Ramakrishna, in speaking of power, always stressed on a commission from God. In his opinion, people will obey the orders of a person who is officially entrusted with a particular duty: 'A worthless man may talk his head off preaching, and yet he will produce no effect. But people will listen to him if he is armed with a badge of authority from God. One cannot teach others without the commission from God. A teacher of men must have great power.'<sup>14</sup>

Another beautiful and more substantial example by Sri Ramakrishna bears mention here: Some people used to befoul the bank of the Haldarpukur at Kamarpukur every morning. The villagers would notice it and abuse the offenders. But that didn't stop it. At last the villagers filed a petition with the Government. An officer visited the place and put up a sign: 'Commit no nuisance. Offenders will be punished.' That stopped it completely. Afterwards there was no more trouble. It was a government order, and everyone had to obey it (668).

## Conclusion

Sometimes, rarely though, this commandment may come from the highest of all authorities, that is, from the Divine. The individual on whom this divine dispensation descends is the fittest person to exercise power. In such a case the power one wields is not one's own but belongs to the Divine. The Rig Veda records an unparalleled statement in the form of a mantra, which is popularly known as *Devi Suktam*. It says that

the person whom the Divine Mother chooses is made mighty, powerful, wise. This knowledge can stop once for all the desperate rat race for power and fame.

We will bring our long discussion on power to an end with a story of subtle humour. Adhar Sen, a lay disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, held a high post of deputy magistrate. He used to come to Dakshineswar after a day's work in the evening, and slept in Sri Ramakrishna's room for quite some time before leaving for home. This practice lasted for a long time. One day, Adhar challenged Sri Ramakrishna with a snobbish air: "What powers do you have?" The Master laughed and said, "By the grace of the Mother I lull to sleep those very deputy magistrates who are feared and respected by many others."<sup>15</sup>

QPB

## References

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2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.106.
3. Eric Fromm, *Man for Himself* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 87-8.
4. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra*, 2.13.
5. *Complete Works*, 6.177.
6. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 669-70.
7. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.2.
8. *Ishavasya Upanishad*, 7.
9. *Gita*, 18.63.
10. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.1.6.
11. See Ramanuja, *Vedartha Sangraha*, 245.
12. See Bhartrihari, *Nitishatakam*, 75.
13. *Complete Works*, 1.115.
14. *Gospel*, 466.
15. Swami Chetanananda, *They Lived with God* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 280.

# ***The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies***

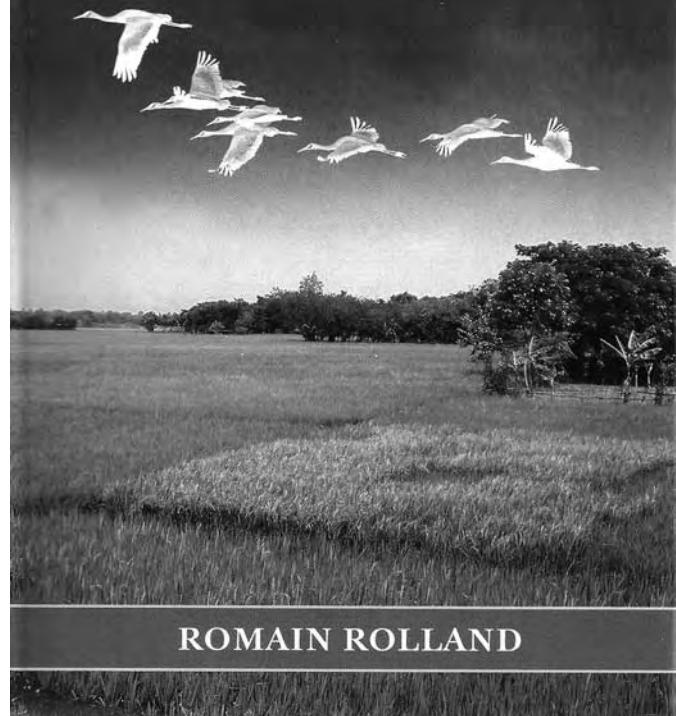
**Ruchira Mitra**

BIOGRAPHIES OF SAINTS serve many purposes. They raise ethical issues, promote devoutness, and spirituality. They create links between the ordinary people and God. They serve as 'critiques of contemporary life', provide lessons in behaviour, gender roles 'and even religious dissent'. A good life-story provides a model for fine behaviour and spiritual aspiration.<sup>1</sup> This kind of biography has a lasting influence on posterity. Generations come and go but what remain are the impressions and great acts of religious reformers.

Moreover, modern biographies are rich in literary values and consequently, are widely read. Hence, their impact on society, politics, religion, and later literature is worthy of discussion. Many 'think that religion and mysticism and social amelioration and political and economic reconstruction cannot unite and declare that the secular and spiritual ideals are polar opposites. ... But the mystics, the saints and the sages of India prove standing refutation of this gross misconception.'<sup>2</sup> Down the centuries, the long line of saints and sages bears witness as to how religion has been the main principle of social change.

In the modern age, Sri Ramakrishna was a key figure in what is considered to be the Hindu renaissance of the nineteenth century. His extraordinary life of intense spirituality infused massive

# ***The Life of Ramakrishna***



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strength and vitality into all the branches of Indian life: literature, art, culture, social welfare, and even political awakening. He established a new epoch in the life of the Indian people consistent with India's past heritage and also keeping up with the needs of changing times, in harmony with the Western ideals. In a sense he represented the old India, and yet had a message for the emerging new India. Therefore, in this article we will discuss the influence exerted by the biographies of Sri Ramakrishna on the literary, social, religious, and political fields in the last century.

## ***The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies on Religion***

Literature plays a major role in furthering the cause of a spiritual movement because it

introduces a vast majority of people to the ideas that shape it.

The spiritual power of a divine incarnation manifests and unfolds in a subtle manner, almost imperceptible to gross human intellect and understanding. ... Though the process of spiritual transformation—individual and collective—of individuals and society takes place slowly and subtly, the role that literature surcharged with the spiritual power of World Teachers plays, cannot be underestimated in effecting such transformation. The vast literature associated with great spiritual movements like Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement gives us only a faint glimpse, like the proverbial tip of the iceberg, of its immense magnitude, vitality and future possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna 'was a spiritual guide not only to monks but also to householders'. He always stressed activism, spiritual and social. While the contemporary 'Brahmo movement remained primarily an elitist movement, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement overstepped bourgeois limits'. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings have become the ideal of numerous spiritual leaders and ordinary practitioners. His famous dictum '*Jato mat tato path*; as many faiths, so many paths', 'showed the validity of all faiths ... He rescued religion from the trammels of tenet and dogma, rite and liturgy' He made the path of spiritual journey easy. His broad 'spiritual humanism ... also took cognizance of the individuality and freedom of man'.<sup>4</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's numerous biographies and the books on his teachings have 'played a leading role in the modern revival of Hinduism in India'.<sup>5</sup> Born during a social upheaval in Bengal in particular and India in general, Sri Ramakrishna with his exemplary life and teachings used the opportunity to bring back Hinduism to its pristine glory.

As a result of his realization through all forms of discipline, he was firmly convinced that all religions were true—that every doctrinal

system represented a path to God. The great systems of thought known as Dualism, Qualified Monism and Monism—Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita and Advaita—he perceived to be merely different stages in man's progress towards the goal. He held that they were not contradictory, but complementary, being suited to different mental outlooks.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, to understand better his impact on religion we have to read all his major biographies. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings do not appear in any obvious form. He read nothing; he wrote nothing. His knowledge came straight from God. His disciples recorded his words only in the context of the spiritual force of his personality, and therefore in collected form these sayings have the character of a gospel, a message of salvation centered in the spiritual teachings of his own life.

*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* are the embodiments of his teachings and exemplary life. Through his teachings Sri Ramakrishna combated Christian proselytising and modern secularism; and re-established the eternal principles of the Vedas and Hinduism.

As revealed by the various biographies, the Bhagavadgita and Vedanta occupy 'an important place in the discourse of Sri Ramakrishna and his favourite pupil, Vivekananda'.<sup>7</sup> His teachings were meant for unifying the diverse paths leading to God. Advaita was his answer to the violence-affected modern world. Sri Ramakrishna was passionately drawn to worship the one Reality in various temples and through diverse sacred traditions. He himself proclaimed: 'He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One'.<sup>8</sup> All his visions of the personal God finally led to the experience of the impersonal Brahman. This impersonal spirit is the basis of harmony of religions, he taught.

A worshipper of the personal God can show respect to other faiths. He demonstrated through his own life that all religions ultimately lead sincere aspirants to the same goal of pure spirit.

He pronounced that 'all human beings who seek' God 'are addressing and approaching precisely the same Divine Reality'.<sup>9</sup> Errors of understanding and superstitious behaviour in various religious traditions do not matter because errors occur when they are imperfectly practised. Every human approach inevitably contains error or partial understanding. Such distortions are present in our own practice too, but is difficult to notice because each person stubbornly assumes that 'his watch alone keeps correct time'.<sup>10</sup> There is no way to eliminate one's personal, social, or religious context from every error, but if one perseveres in sheer yearning for God, sheer love for Truth, these unavoidable limitations will gradually dissolve.

Max Muller was struck by the broad, liberal, and absolutely unsectarian spirit which pervades the utterings of Sri Ramakrishna. Whosoever has read his *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* is 'impressed with the universality of His spiritual ideals which embraced the ideals of all mankind'.<sup>11</sup> Muller rightly noted that Sri Ramakrishna 'himself never claimed to be the founder of a new religion. He simply preached the old religion of India, which was founded on the Veda, more particularly on the Upanishads'.<sup>12</sup> Muller said further that Sri Ramakrishna 'was a living illustration of the truth that Vedanta, when properly realised, can become a practical rule of life' (47). Muller commented 'that Vedanta philosophy ... is the very marrow running through all the bones of Ramakrishna's doctrine' (70).

Lex Hixon puts Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of Advaita Vedanta in a beautiful way: 'Each person proceeds on a different plane of knowledge or articulation, yet the intimacy of the divine embrace remains the same. There is no

hierarchy among the children of God. No one is a stranger to us in the human family or among living creatures. Why? Because it is God alone who dwells within all conscious beings'.<sup>13</sup>

Romain Rolland writes in the introduction to his biography of Sri Ramakrishna that this book comprises 'the account of a lofty system of thought, at once religious and philosophic, moral and social, with its message for modern humanity from the depths of India's past'.<sup>14</sup> Rolland was extremely conscious of the havoc being caused by the World War and wanted to bring back common sense to the strife-torn Europeans. The method he decided to follow was presenting to the Europeans the life story of a saint, not ancient, but belonging to the near contemporary world. He says: 'It is because Ramakrishna more fully than any other man not only conceived, but realised in himself the total Unity of this river of God, open to all rivers and all streams, that I have given him my love; and I have drawn a little of sacred water to slake the great thirst of the world' (xiv).

Another non-Indian biographer, Richard Schiffman found in Sri Ramakrishna the ultimate spiritual understanding that everything is One, all distinctions between person and person are only apparent. This unifying theory is the best solution to all religious intolerance. Therefore, to spread this message of unity, in his book *Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for the New Age* Schiffman plunges into a detailed analysis of the Vedanta philosophy. He discusses at length the similarity and differences between the scientific and Vedantic approaches to the mysteries of the universe, the Hindu tradition of belief in the four *yugas*, epochs, and the inevitability of the 'rampant secularism of our present day' in *kaliyuga* as predicted in the Hindu scriptures.<sup>15</sup> Schiffman talks about 'just one phase in the vast turning wheel of consciousness', the

on-the-surface ‘sensory world as a thin shell concealing the depths of Reality’ and about ‘concentrating exclusively on the shell and ignoring the great spiritual treasure which underlies it’ (ibid.). He talks about the similarity between the great scientists and the Indian mystics who ‘share a common devotion to truth’ (26). He describes the three types of souls with various levels of maturity: ‘immature’ people who ‘finally feel goaded to search beyond the instinctual bounds of the sensory world for a more enduring reality’, the ‘spiritual seekers’, and the ‘eternally free’ souls—‘Sri Ramakrishna is a perfect example of this group’ (27). Schiffman describes the struggle of the souls to reach the ultimate goal and the variety of ways to reach that goal. He writes: ‘Those who claim that there is only one path to God insult His all-encompassing wideness. Ramakrishna, for whom all creedal exclusivity was anathema, was to emphasize time and again in his teachings that there is not a single “correct” way up the divine mountain’ (28). Schiffman then proceeds to discuss ‘the three basic paths which correspond to the broad divisions in human nature between active, intellectual, and devotional personalities’ (29): ‘the way of dedicated work’ of the great karma yogis, ‘the heroic path of *jnana* yoga’ (ibid.), and ‘the way of devoted surrender’ as practised by bhakti yogis, the easiest way to God in this age, as enjoined by Sri Ramakrishna (30).

Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings brought back faith in religion. In this connection we can recollect the foreword to *The Life of Ramakrishna* written by Mahatma Gandhi in 1924, which was reproduced by Romain Rolland in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna: ‘The story of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa’s life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real

and that all else is an illusion. Ramakrishna was a living embodiment of godliness.’<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi also acknowledges the tremendous impact of Sri Ramakrishna’s sayings. In the same write-up he notes: ‘His sayings are not those of a mere learned man but they are pages from the Book of Life. They are revelations of his own experience. They therefore leave on the reader an impression which he cannot resist’ (ibid.).

‘The uplift of the masses, the chief plank in Gandhi’s platforms was Vivekananda’s legacy.’<sup>17</sup> Moreover, by introducing the method of objective verification in the field of religious experience, Sri Ramakrishna laid the foundation of what may be termed as a scientific religion to suit the modern scientific spirit. Gandhi’s experiments in religion provided the inspiration for his *My Experiments with Truth*. Sri Ramakrishna’s ideal of *sarva dharma samanvaya*, harmony of all religions, found an echo in Gandhi’s ‘equal respect for all religions’.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the profound significance of Sri Ramakrishna’s biographies is that they spread the message of the synthesis of all religions. It can be seen that the message is already finding its way into the hearts of people the world over. Sri Ramakrishna’s foremost disciple Swami Vivekananda travelled in 1893 to the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, ‘helping to unify Western and Eastern cultures with the mysterious power of Ramakrishna that so abundantly flows through him’<sup>19</sup>

What Swamiji had ‘understood from Ramakrishna he tried to interpret in the language of modernity that he learned as a young English-educated Kolkata man.’<sup>20</sup> ‘Hinduism had been by and large perceived, not just by missionaries, but by a large section of the educated middle-classes of India’ as ‘a pagan, superstitious, idolatrous and barbarous set of rituals, customs and practices’ (ibid.). Keeping the teachings of

Sri Ramakrishna in mind, Swamiji 'turned it into a rational, universal philosophy, freed from dogma and authority. He did this by making Vedanta the spine of new Hinduism, bhakti its heart, and the yogas its sinews' (ibid.). Ninian Smart says: 'The universalist message of Swami Vivekananda, and of his master, Ramakrishna, genuinely represents a new departure in world religions—the attempt to make the highest form of Hinduism a world faith.'<sup>21</sup>

This is 'leading to a mutual understanding and appreciation of not only religious and spiritual values, but also social and cultural ideas and ideals among the different sections of humanity, and ushering in an era of respect, trust, fellowship, and co-operation in the common endeavour to uplift themselves'.<sup>22</sup> Swami Bhashyananda puts it succinctly: 'A circle may have many points, but all radii ultimately end with the center. This is Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to the realm of religion'.<sup>23</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's 'clear exposition of the Hindu scriptures, his ringing sincerity and, his stirring eloquence had brought back a large number of the educated young Hindus of Bengal to the religion of their forefathers'.<sup>24</sup> As some of these opinions affirm, Sri Ramakrishna's greatest achievement is 'the reconstruction of Hinduism, [which] consisted essentially of four elements: a) non-sectarianism; b) anti-ritualism; c) religion in the service of humanity; d) Advaita as the future religion of thinking humanity'.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies On Subsequent Literature***

With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, a silent revolution started in the field of literature as well. Along with numerous well-researched biographies, the vast body of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature and scriptural translations and annotations which the Ramakrishna Order

has produced has become an integral part of the modern renaissance of literature in India. The Order publishes spiritual, religious, and cultural literature in English, Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Odia, Nepali, Urdu, Punjabi, Japanese, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Brazilian Portuguese, Dutch, Thai, and the north-eastern Indian languages, Khasi, Nocte, and Wancho. There are twenty-one magazines in different languages published regularly by the Order.

The plentiful biographies of Sri Ramakrishna produced by numerous publishers are unique in their own way. Sri Ramakrishna's biographers have really experimented with various literary forms to tell the unique story of his exalted life. There is one important book written in Bengali by Sri Ramakrishna's devotee Akshay Kumar Sen, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*. Sen completely versifies the story in old Bengali *kathakata* tradition. This book is a minutely detailed account of Sri Ramakrishna's entire life and hence huge in size. It is so unique in its use of language that it remained untranslated even after nearly a hundred years of its publication. Only recently its prose translation has come out, where both the charm of poetry and typical literary flavour are lost completely. Non-Indian authors of repute, including Max Muller and Romain Rolland, wrote landmark biographies. Lex Hixon's *Great Swan* is a dialogue. Richard Schiffman's *Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for the New Age* is more a formal biography, or as the publisher notes, 'a study' by a foreigner to this culture. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* again is in a dramatised form, with proper dramatic settings and dialogues. The structure of Swami Saradananda's Bengali biography, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* is momentous in its approach. Swami Chetanananda's and some other biographies are translations, again an important literary device.

This tremendous impact is still continuing. Even twenty-first century writers like Rajiv Mehrotra and Amiya P Sen, are producing biographies of this saint. It is noteworthy that each biography is rich in literary values.

Since Sri Ramakrishna's time, Bengali language has become the medium of the highest realisation, the language of the common man, and the ideal form of expression in literature. Vivekananda became the forerunner of modern Bengali prose, Girish Chandra gave a new impetus to Bengali drama, Saradananda wrote one of the best biographies of Ramakrishna; in modern times Achintya Kumar Sengupta wrote two very popular books on Ramakrishna [*Parampurusha Sri Ramakrishna* in four volumes and *Kavi Sri Ramakrishna*]. Swami Nityatmananda continued with the tradition of Sri M.'s *Kathamrita* with his sixteen-volume '*Sri Ma Darshan*' which is based on his association with Sri M. With Sri Ramakrishna's growing influence on Bengali literature, Sri M.'s impact is also being felt day by day. He is the modern Garuda, carrying the message of Sri Ramakrishna for all those who are weary and thirsty at present or in future.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies on Society***

Sri Ramakrishna's biographies also established a radical social uplift when they propagated his unique pronouncements: 'If you wish to find God, serve man, knowing him to be the veritable manifestation of God.' This teaching of his has an immense spiritual force on the social plane. By his Advaitic realization of the unity of all existence, he came to feel the presence of the Divine in all things and beings, and so, to him, there was nothing that was not worship and adoration. ... 'It is not compassion for others, but rather service to man, recognizing him to be the veritable manifestation of God—*jive shivajnane seva*'.<sup>27</sup>

Another aspect of social uplift brought about by the biographies of Sri Ramakrishna was

regarding his attitude towards women, who held a lowly social position until then. He demonstrated the process of overcoming lust and greed in daily life by proclaiming that all women are manifestations of the Divine Mother. He gave spiritual status to all women, even fallen women, by viewing them as the embodiment of Shakti. Sri Ramakrishna also found a way out of the evils of casteism by pronouncing that there is no caste for the devotees. This too had a salient effect on the society.

### ***The Impact of Sri Ramakrishna's Biographies On Indian Nationalism***

Sri Ramakrishna's biographies exerted their influence on other aspects of Indian life as well. 'His spiritual movement indirectly aided nationalism, as it rejected caste distinctions and religious prejudices.'<sup>28</sup>

By bringing back the glory of Hinduism, Sri Ramakrishna became instrumental in bringing back national pride. His foremost disciple Swamiji, inspired by his guru, wrote books to awaken the sleeping spirit of nationalism among the educated Indians. Reading his books, numerous people joined the nationalistic movement. In an article Swami Sarvasthananda mentions that in Kakasaheb Kalelkar's 'collected works, *Kalelkar Granthavali*, published during his birth centenary, we find many articles and quotations on Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission'.<sup>29</sup>

A noted historian says:

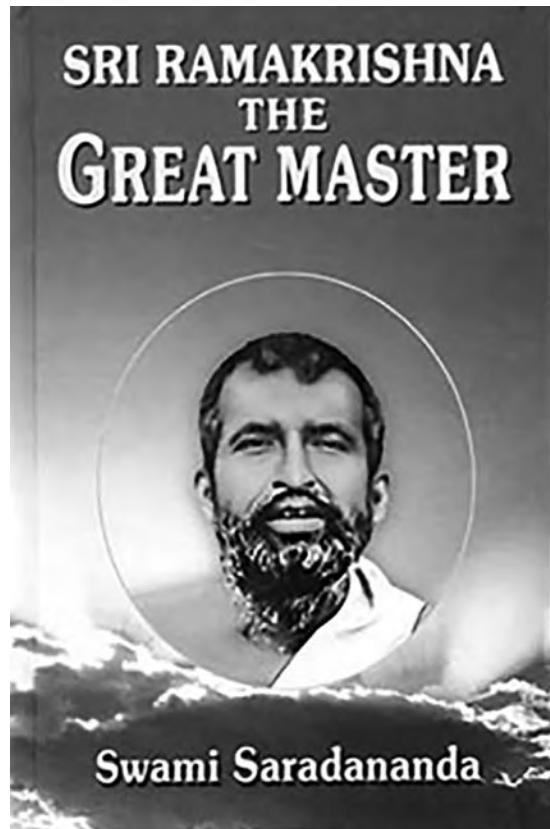
The greatest leaders of the early twentieth century, whatever their walk of life—Rabindranath Tagore, the prince of poets; Aurobindo Ghose, the greatest mystic-philosopher; Mahatma Gandhi, who eventually shook the Anglo-Indian Empire to destruction—all acknowledged their overriding debt to both the Swan and the Eagle, to Ramakrishna who stirred the heart of India, and to Vivekananda who awakened its soul.<sup>30</sup>

Romain Rolland wrote the book *Mahatma Gandhi* in 1924. He knew while writing this book on Gandhi that there were personalities behind Gandhi, and a great renaissance movement that had prepared a 'tiled way' for the great work of Gandhi. This was instrumental in getting Rolland interested in Sri Ramakrishna.

The tremendous influence exerted by the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna on Mahatma Gandhi is beautifully expressed by Vincent Sheean in his book *Lead Kindly Light*. He writes that Gandhi was 'always ready to acknowledge his masters, who were indeed, each in his field, more highly developed than he'.<sup>31</sup> Sheean elaborates this by saying that Gandhi had 'in sanctity of personal life a large number of Hindu exemplars; and ... in the quality Indians call "spirituality", the Mahatma very humbly recognized himself to be a follower' (315–6). Then Sheean says: 'But certainly his reverence for Ramakrishna was strong and unfeigned, and a more extreme mystical phenomenon than Ramakrishna has yet to be observed on earth. Gandhi's reserve on the subject of religious "realizations" was seldom broken ... Gandhi was unable to resist his own feeling that the hand of God had somehow fallen upon Ramakrishna' (316–7).

The change of India's image in the West and the starting of a movement of social and cultural regeneration were directly linked to the birth of Indian nationalism, which was taking place at that time. The key to all these contributions was Swamiji's modernisation of Hinduism in the light of the teachings of his master Sri Ramakrishna.

As biographer Swami Nikhilananda asserts, Sri Ramakrishna and his foremost disciple Swamiji 'were the first awakeners of India's national consciousness'.<sup>32</sup> Through them 'India became aware of the power of the soul' and its 'illimitable possibilities' (458–9). He also says

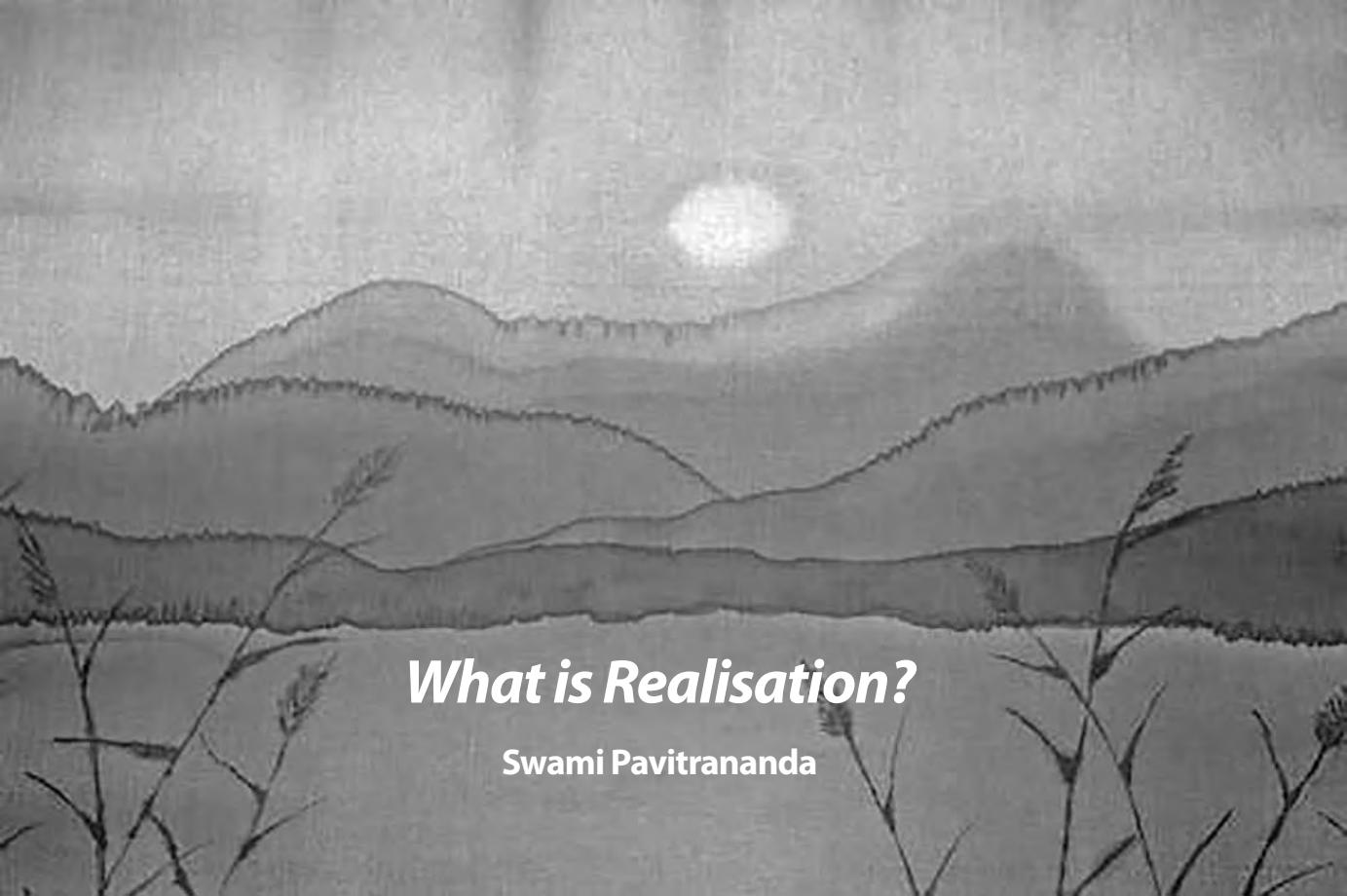


that Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji 'were India's first nationalist leaders in the true sense of the term' (459). Sri 'Ramakrishna was the power and Vivekananda the voice. The movement for India's liberation started from Dakshineswar. The subsequent political leaders of the country, consciously or unconsciously, received their inspiration from Vivekananda's message' (ibid.).

Sri Ramakrishna's 'was indeed a life which furnished a happy solution to the manifold intricate problems of human existence'.<sup>33</sup> Sri Ramakrishna 'incarnated to enlighten the national life'.<sup>34</sup> 'He was himself perfect; all his spiritual practices were for the education of the world'.<sup>35</sup> 'The spiritual power of Ramakrishna ... gave peace to the seekers of knowledge around the world, and created a great stir in the thought traditions of the world'.<sup>36</sup>

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# What is Realisation?

Swami Pavitrananda

He who has seen the Lord is a changed being. Some are already awake. These have certain marks. They do not care to hear or speak of anything but what relates to God, just as the bird called Chataka cries only for rain-water, though there are the seven seas and the Ganges and the Yamuna and all the other rivers full of water. Though its throat might be parched with thirst, it would drink no water other than rain-water.

What are the indications of God's advent into the human heart? As the glow of dawn heralds the rising sun, so unselfishness, purity and righteousness announce the advent of the Lord. ...

Ananda, or perfect bliss within, is one of the signs of God-vision. The waves roll on the surface of the ocean, but the deep expanse of water lies unruffled beneath. ...

What is the state which a Siddha (perfect man) attains? As a potato or brinjal becomes soft and pulpy when it gets Siddha, so a man,

when he becomes a Siddha, is seen to be all humility and tenderness. ...

He is truly an Atma-jnani, knower of the Self, who is dead even in this life; that is, whose passions and desires have been destroyed as in a dead body. ...

When man attains true Jnana, he does not perceive God as a far-off being. He is no more felt thereafter as 'He', but as 'This', 'here within'—as within one's own soul. He is within all; whoever seeks Him, meets Him there.

A jar kept in water is full of water inside and outside. Thus the soul immersed in God sees the all-pervading Spirit within and without.<sup>1</sup>

**U**SUALLY, those who are interested in religion think of salvation as the goal of religious pursuit. They talk of saving, and want help so that they may get salvation. They pray to the Lord that he may save them. But realisation is different; one who talks in terms

of realisation does not talk of being saved. He wants to know the Truth; he wants to see Truth. He does not think that he is in difficulty, that he has sins and so on, nor does he want to be saved. He wants to know what God is; he wants to know his Self. So realisation is quite different from salvation, at least in attitudes, though ultimately both may come to the same goal.

Now, what is realisation? It depends on one's background, one's social tradition, one's environment, to say what realisation means, what the goal of religious life is. Usually, it depends entirely upon that. A class of persons will not care for religion. They will say that religion, metaphysics and all these things are of no use, of no practical help. Many of those who are for religion or are interested in religion, think in terms of social good, and therefore religious feeling expresses itself very often in forms of social service, which in turn reflects on ourselves. It might be enlightened self-interest. In any case, with a vast majority of persons who are interested in religion, religion means some good to society. That is all. They cannot go further; they cannot reach higher than that.

But there are certain persons who are daring and courageous; they want to find the last limit of religious pursuit. It is not simply doing good things in this world. What is the end of that? What is the end and beginning of this world? They are daring souls; they want to reach the highest summit, if there is any.

The religions that talk in terms of salvation bring in the thought of heaven and hell. Let us think of Christianity. What does it mean by salvation? What does it say is the ultimate goal of religious pursuit? It thinks in terms of what will come after death, of the resurrection, of eternal heaven or hell. Many are goaded to religious life by the threat of suffering, or by the allurement of joys. We want joy in this life, and we want greater joy in the life to come. Heaven simply

continues our aspirations for joy. This is something like a child's life. Children will be afraid of doing bad because the father will get angry, and children will do something good because there is the temptation of getting some candies from their mother. So, people are goaded to religious life by the allurement of heaven or the fear of hell fire, and therefore they speak of the Saviour.

Islam also speaks in a similar way. It is reported that a very learned Mohammedan, well-versed in Islamic theology said: 'Well, I have practised religion, the Islamic faith, very conscientiously. I know the Koran, but I cannot think of a heaven after death where there will be cool rivers and gardens of date trees.' You see, living in the Arabian desert, they appreciate cool rivers and gardens. They think of heaven in terms of some enjoyment, of cool rivers, beautiful gardens, and so on.

In Judaism also, to some extent, they speak of heaven, although they also think that on this earth you must live well. This life is important; take care of this life. But the question of heaven and hell comes also.

One thing is illogical in it; whenever a thing is material, it cannot be eternal, and what we get as a result of our finite attempts will also be finite. There cannot be an infinite heaven that way, even in terms of material comforts. Fortunately, by the same logic, hell fire cannot be eternal. It is not logical, although it may appeal to sentiments. But we should not criticise these things, because sentiment is a great thing. Why, many persons are driven to religion by these sentiments, and that is alright. But if we want to judge metaphysically or rationally what realisation is, what the goal of life is, that is a different thing.

Well, it is a common weakness of human beings to think of post-mortem happiness. Even in popular Hinduism, people also think in terms of heaven and hell; in the mythological stories there is a great deal of description about heaven and hell, which

appeals to the popular mind. Fortunately, they say there that heaven is not eternal, nor is hell eternal. They say that if you do things which are bad, you will suffer in the life to come, but there will be an end to that suffering; you will come again to this earth, and you will have another chance.

Buddhism is very rational; Buddhism says the goal is to attain a state of knowledge where there will be cessation of all misery. How will that knowledge come? That comes when you know what you really are. They will analyse what the human personality is: that the human personality is a combination of the human body, feelings, past impressions, impressions of past lives, and general consciousness. Just analyse these things, meditate on those ideas, and also be engaged in good activities. You will know that these things are simply the outcome of the integration of certain parts, and have no intrinsic existence as a whole. Man is composed of his material body, his feelings, his thoughts, and so on. When you know this perfectly well, you will never be entangled in that; there will be an end of misery. Here it is put in negative terms, the end of misery, but the real thing is that when there is an end to misery, it will not be void; it will be something positive. There is a great deal of discussion about these things.

Let us take another religion, Jainism. They say that religious life means right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct. Right faith means faith in the teachings of the saints, the Jain saints or Tirthankaras. You must have right faith in their words, and not only faith, for you must have correct understanding of that faith, of their words. And when you have right knowledge, naturally with a little effort you will be able to do right actions. So, from right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct will come the spiritual consummation of your life. That will be infinite faith, infinite power, infinite bliss, infinite joy, and so on. They do not talk in terms of heaven and hell.

So there are certain religions which speak in terms of 'now'; one should have the experience of realisation now. The monistic school of Vedanta says that you are the eternal Self; you must know and realise that you are the eternal Self. What is meant by the eternal Self? What are the characteristics? What are the components? You are absolute Existence; you are undying absolute Knowledge, and absolute Bliss. When you realise that you are the eternal Self, you will know your real nature. It is absolute Existence, and therefore it is absolute Knowledge, that Knowledge which is the source of all knowledge. And when you have that Knowledge, it gives you Bliss, it gives you Joy. That Joy is not like our earthly joy; this is a Joy beyond the reach of earthly joys and sorrows. That Joy is permanent, unlike material joy; that is spiritual Joy, which is everlasting.

But that is according to the monistic school. Since Ramanuja speaks in terms of God, the Ramanuja school will say that real Joy means union with God. But it is not complete identification, and so you enjoy more the presence of God. According to Ramanuja, real religious life means that you have been able to get rid of all your human weaknesses; you have been able to control your senses so that they do not run after sense objects. You have achieved complete mastery of yourself, and then you are constantly thinking of God. When you think constantly of God, your memory of your real Self awakens. In ordinary things, when you repeat a thing, you remember it, and when you want to memorise a passage, you have to repeat it many times. In the same way, when you constantly think of God, memory of your real Self comes, and you feel the constant presence of God. When you feel the constant presence of God here, you will feel the same thing in the life to come, and you will be in the presence of God always. That is the ideal of realisation.

Those who are dualists will think of other

ways. You will always be separate from God, and you will be in his presence or you will receive his favour. They come down a little towards materialistic enjoyment. It is a joy to be always in the presence of God, we receive his kindness, and so on.

But let us go to the source of Vedanta; what do the Upanishads and the Gita say? The Gita says: 'What is realisation? Realisation is that state, attaining which you do not think of any other joy; you do not have any yearning for any earthly good.'<sup>2</sup> That is a state which cannot be disturbed by any earthly joys or sorrows. We are easily disturbed by our joys or sorrows. We know that sorrows certainly disturb us, but we are not always conscious that our earthly joys also disturb us, that enjoyment does not allow us to see and perceive our real nature. So the Gita says that it is the attainment of that state, getting which you do not hanker after any earthly joys.

Once, while I was very young, a friend of mine came to the Belur Math, our monastery. I believe he was thinking at that time of what direction his life would take, and he told me: 'Well, I have come to the Belur Math, but it is not paying.' He said that in fun. I said: 'Come a little more, and you will not yearn after things which pay. You will have a different evaluation of things.'

The Gita said these things, that we get to a state, attaining which we do not think in terms of what will pay, and we will not be disturbed by earthly joys and sorrows. In one of the Upanishads, a description of that realisation is given in very glowing terms and in a poetic way. 'That is a state which cannot be described by words, which thoughts cannot reach, and that is a state of bliss.'<sup>3</sup> And when you attain to that state, you are free from all fears, the fear of insecurity, fear of death, fear of everything. That is a state which words cannot reach, where thoughts cannot go, which thoughts cannot describe, but it is a state of bliss which gives you perfect immunity from all fears.

That is a state which, when you reach it, you do not think in terms of, 'I did something wrong for which I have to repent. I did something good for which I feel happy.' It is a state beyond the reach of these dual ideas. Well, it is only on the earthly plane that you feel you must not do something wrong; you have reached a state where this earthly morality has no place, for it is beyond that. It is super-morality, and you cannot do anything wrong in that state; you have reached perfection.

When you hear that this is a state which words cannot reach, which thoughts cannot describe, it seems something mystical. But that is a state to which a person of every religion attains, when he attains the ultimate Reality.

St Augustine in his *Confessions*, described his experience of the highest state. He said:

If to any the tumult of the flesh were hushed, hushed the images of earth, and waters, and air, hushed also the pole of heaven, yea the very soul be hushed to herself, and by not thinking on self surmount self, hushed all dreams and imaginary revelations, every tongue and every sign, and whatsoever exists only in transition, since if any could hear, all these say, We made not ourselves, but He made us that abideth for ever—If then having uttered this, they too should be hushed, having roused only our ears to Him who made them, and He alone speak, not by them but by Himself, that we may hear His Word, not through any tongue of flesh, nor Angel's voice, nor sound of thunder, nor in the dark riddle of a similitude, but might hear Whom in these things we love, might hear His Very Self without these.<sup>4</sup>

And he came down and left that sphere, and returned to the world of speech, which has beginning and end. When he came down, he came down to the level of the spoken word, but he could not describe that state. When he reached that state, he went to where spoken words had

their end, and when he came down, he came down to the sphere of the spoken word, where spoken words have their beginning. That means words cannot describe the state where the tumults of the flesh are hushed, and all the feelings and emotions that give you trouble are hushed into silence.

This is perfectly similar. In one of the Upanishads it says: 'When you reach that state, death has no meaning for you. You see both sides at the same time, life and death, and earthly sorrows have no meaning for you.'<sup>5</sup> You have reached the state of absolute Existence; you see everything in its original, absolute Existence, and then you do not fear disease, you do not fear misery, you do not fear anything. You have attained that state which is permanent and eternal.

Can that state be reached new and in this life? That is the beauty of the Upanishads. It always insists that it can be attained now, and that it should be the endeavour of each person to attain it now. In one of the passages it says: 'When you know your Self as tangibly as you see material things about which you say, "This is it", what fear have you then? How can suffering or misery or even earthly happiness affect you, when you have reached that ultimate Existence, the goal of human life?'

And it says that if you do not attain to that state, you are bound to be affected by joys and sorrows, and will always be at the mercy of worldly things. You can never have abiding peace. In this life, if one cannot realise the ultimate state, one is never free, never safe. It is an illusion to think we shall some time get peace. We know that only when we come to the end of our existence. Every young man begins his life with great hope, only to know at the end of his existence that it was a mistaken idea that one could have a resting place in such a life, in such a pursuit. This may frighten us, but it is a fact.

Study the history of the human race, and what do you find? The history of the human race

is a battleground for gladiators. In the march of humanity, nation after nation, race after race, has come and gone. What is the gain? What was it? Simply a battlefield. Only now and then do we find some bright spot, some oasis. There are some saints belonging to all religions who are the real cool rivers, in terms of the Islamic saying, in this desert life. They have burnt a candle to give us illumination, and they said, 'We have found a place which gives you abiding peace.' Except for them, what is there?

The Upanishad says it clearly. We may be frightened; we may feel unhappy, seeing that this is the state of affairs, but this is the real state of affairs. We have to struggle and struggle, and we do not know for what; we do not know what the meaning of life is. But real realisation means that you know the meaning of life, that you have reached the goal of life. And it must be achieved here.

And what is the experience at that state? How do you get that experience? The Upanishad says, 'You do not get that with these eyes, or your ears, or the senses.' It cannot be seen by your earthly vision, nor heard with your ears. You feel the presence. But it is not a vague feeling; it is a tangible feeling, and you feel the pervading presence of God. In such a state you live in an amphibious world. You live in this earthly world, but you have access to another world from which you focus your activities on this world. Here, we live in this world, and gravely think in terms of another world which will come, and which will give us happiness. But that state means that your centre of gravity has been transferred, and from that world you focus your activities to this world. Those who can do that become tremendous workers, and their influence lasts long, for centuries, even for thousands of years.

But what do you feel as you go towards that state? What are the experiences you pass through? What happens in your life? Let us see what

happens in spiritual life in a typical case. It first begins when you do not find any satisfaction in the experiences of the world, and you turn towards spiritual things, towards religion. In the beginning it is a struggle; you feel a great dryness, doubt, and you are in anxiety and suspense. Then comes some glimpse of joy, which gives you strength to pursue your spiritual practices. And then the joy becomes more, and more, and you feel there is a power to help you. You feel that you are not really helpless, not really insecure. It was your ignorance that made you think that you were in a helpless world. At first, this thought of helplessness comes, but then the thought of joy begins to develop.

You may get some spiritual experience, some vision which sustains you. If it is really a vision, throughout your whole life you will know that you are never alone. But that is not enough, because there are doubts and you are not sure. That vision may come suddenly, in a flash, but it does not last. Still, it gives you strength and steadiness, and as you pursue the light, there will come a time when it will be an eternal presence, even in this life. If it comes in a flash, by pure logic it must be permanent. If you see, all of a sudden, a ray of light coming from a cloudy sky, it is sure there is a blazing light behind it. In the same way, one gets a ray of light and one then gets the hope that there is something permanent behind it. And those who pursue spiritual practices will come face to face with that reality.

Now, it may sound as if all those things are theoretical for ordinary minds. What is the use of discussing them? It seems as if one speaks of another world to which you have no access, a world which is unreal, to which you do not belong, and, who knows, to which you shall never belong. It is not so. The spiritual experiences of the sages were handed down to us because of their great compassion. They serve as guideposts. To ordinary persons, those words, those verses describing

the highest spiritual experiences may seem like dreams, with no basis, no reality, but it is not so to persons who are struggling for spiritual life. Who knows if such a stray passage from the Upanishads will give them strength, will give them succour and consolation, will give them hope in time of despair? For them, those things are real, though they have not had the real spiritual experience.

But in what way will they influence others in whom religious aspiration has not yet dawned? Well, there may be influence, when you read and study those things. From study, from thinking over those things intellectually, there will come a time when you will feel, 'Well, it seems there is some truth in those things'. Because they are put in such a way that you can have no doubt about it. When there is Truth, Truth is irresistible. So, there will come a time when one is interested in a lukewarm way.

And from the experiences of the world, when you are disillusioned, these things will have a greater value. At first, you will see a faint glimpse, but the faint glimpse will become bigger and bigger, and who knows, at some time it will be the ideal for the person who started with lukewarm interest. It might affect his life this way, and it will inspire him to put those ideas into practice.

And who knows, as they pursue their spiritual practices, they will reach that state of realisation. At that time, realisation will not be simply a dream, not a theoretical thing, not a mere aspiration. It will be a fact. Let us hope and pray that this state will come to each one of us sooner or later.



## References

1. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 2000), 257–8.
2. See Gita, 6.22.
3. See *Kena Upanishad*, 1.3.
4. St Augustine, *Confessions*, Chapter 10.
5. See *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 1.11.

# *Meditation on the Upanishads*

**Swami Shraddhananda**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*



IMAGE: [HTTP://MEDITATINGHIMALAYAS.BLOGSPOT.IN](http://MEDITATINGHIMALAYAS.BLOGSPOT.IN)

**I**N THIS EVALUATION OF JOY, the whole universe is taken into consideration. The joy in the fish, ants, birds, and all creatures are included. In this verse, the *Taittiriya Upanishad* describes a unit of human joy common to all beings: 'Consider the lot of a young man, noble, well-read, intelligent, strong, healthy, with all

the wealth of the world at his command. Assume that he is happy, and measure his joy as one unit. One hundred times that joy is one unit of the joy of Gandharvas: but no less joy than Gandharvas has the seer to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.'<sup>12</sup>

Gandharvas are celestial beings of a high

order. If we go to that sphere of heaven we will hear all kinds of music—Western music, Eastern music, Hawaiian music, infinite music. One who has been able to free her or his mind from all desires can go there. For the person of knowledge, the less desires one has the more joy there is. It is our desires that block our joy. To free the mind from desires is most important in order to experience the Self. Self-knowledge has its gradations. Glimpses of Self-knowledge are deeper according to how few desires we have left. We may have glimpses of the Self; it may not be the highest experience of the Self, but it is the Self.

The evolution of spiritual life is the control of desires. The more one becomes spiritually rich, the less one desires things. More and more of our mind becomes free of desires. When full Self-knowledge comes, that joy cannot be measured. When we are thinking of an objective joy within, we can think of this scale of joy in these verses. The truth of the Self cannot be described by any words. Satchidananda is only an approximation. The Upanishad continues on:

He who is the Self in man, and he who is the Self in the sun, are one. Verily, he who knows this truth overcomes the world; he transcends the physical sheath, he transcends the vital sheath, he transcends the mental sheath, he transcends the intellectual sheath, he transcends the sheath of [bliss].<sup>13</sup>

It is written: He who knows the joy of Brahman, which words cannot express and the mind cannot reach, is free from fear. He is not distressed by the thought, 'Why did I not do what is right? Why did I do what is wrong?' He who knows the joy of Brahman, knowing both good and evil, transcends both.<sup>14</sup>

### **Class 13: Meditation on Saguna Brahman**

Our topic is from another Upanishad—namely, the meditation described by the sage Shandilya in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. As we have

been told in the Upanishads, God has an infinite number of attributes. The sages give us many different prescriptions of how to meditate on these infinite attributes. The sages of the Upanishads realised Brahman and so they give us their techniques. This particular meditation is very interesting and also appealing. It is called *shandilya vidya*, the method of meditation by the sage Shandilya. This meditation can only be done on *saguna* Brahman, Brahman with attributes, God. We cannot really meditate on *nirguna* Brahman because it is beyond words and thought. That experience comes by itself; it is self-revealed. But to reach the *nirguna* Brahman experience we must pass through many stages of meditation.

Everything is in God, so when we sit for meditation, naturally some confusion is bound to arise in our minds. That is why we must take direction from the sages. They tell us that *sarvam khalvidam brahma*—all this is certainly Brahman. The scriptures bring us truth that cannot be known through our ordinary senses. We have to have *shraddha*, faith. We have to approach these teachings with great humility and reverence. We have to tell our mind, 'Here is a great declaration of truth, even though my ignorant mind cannot see the truth of it now; still I have faith that the words of the teacher and of the scriptures are true.' If a stage comes in our life when we can see that it is all God, what an elevation of the mind. *sarvam khalvidam brahma*, all this is certainly Brahman. If we carry on with this meditation, eventually we shall certainly be able to see that all this is Brahman. That it is *tajjalana*, from which everything comes.

If this is the truth, then there is no use jumping here and there. We must be quiet and remember this great idea that we have to experience—*tajjalana*, that from which everything comes, which sustains everything and into which

everything enters. If we watch this universe closely we will see these three processes going on: things come, then things stay for a while, and then they go. Everything comes from Brahman, stays in him, and again merges into him.

This is true on the surface, but at the depth it is all one. We can see here that we are not meditating on any form, but simply on the universal form from which everything is coming, staying, and entering. All energy and all that our senses experience—whatever comes to our mind, to our memory—it is all God. Outer space and inner space, it is all God. Not that this universe was created millions of years ago and God has gone away and left it. No. Creation goes on all the time. God is creating—this very instant—our ego-consciousness and our thoughts. He is eternally calm. He is *tajjalana*. If we think this way, then our mind naturally becomes calm.

When our little ego says, 'I can do this; I can do that', then the mind is restless. But if we can see that it is really God that is doing everything, then our mind surrenders. In self-surrender our little ego does not make much noise. The result is *shantam*, peace.

Take the case of two friends sitting in the back seat of an automobile and another friend is in the front driver's seat. One back-seat friend says, 'Oh, watch out. There is a red light up there.' The other back-seat friend says, 'You just sit there and be quiet. The driver knows very well how to drive.' That is self-surrender. If we do something, it is God within us that is doing it. The unripe ego is assertive, but the ripe ego says, 'Thy will be done'. God has entered into everything. Time is rolling on in God and space is in God. When these ideas become stronger and stronger, then inner peace comes. Our eyes will see a thing and then our mind will say, 'This is all God's play'.

For a person who likes to meditate on God with a form such as Shiva, or whatever form

appeals to them, they can say, 'Oh Shiva, I have faith that you are really formless, infinite, and pervading everything.' If we tell ourselves this, we will not be dogmatic. If a devotee says, 'I know my Lord does not merge into the infinite. I want to keep him always in his regular form.' We will say, 'Okay, you stay there. That is all right.'

An important sentence in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* says not to undermine the capacity of the mind. Man is really the mind. Whatever his ideas are, he becomes that.

It is our ideas that are really guiding us. If we bring these ideas about God, though in the beginning we will not have these real experiences, eventually they will become real experiences. For example, if a boy wants to become an engineer, then eventually he can, with effort and education, become an engineer. This encouragement is given.

Some of our normal experiences of life—our actions, our thoughts, our emotions—may be visible from the outside. If there are ten things presently showing when someone observes our exterior expressions, there may be a thousand things actually occurring inside us. The Upanishad says to include this fact in our contemplation of God. First, bring this infinite background to our contemplation. Next, bring the infinite mind of God. God is really manifesting this phenomenon of the mind. It is just like beholding a fabulous flower garden where we marvel saying, 'This is beautiful; this is beautiful. This is beautiful!'

(To be continued)

## References

12. *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1975), 85–6.
13. There was an error in the text that Swami Shraddhananda pointed out and it is corrected here.
14. *The Upanishads*, 87–8.

## Adhyatma

THE WORD *adhyatma* is a commonly used Sanskrit word. It is used by people, who do not even know Sanskrit, as it is present in almost every Indian language. The widely used meaning of the word *adhyatma* is spirituality, but it is necessary to see the other meanings and the origins of this word. This is a Sanskrit word. Sanskrit is a classical language like Greek, Latin, and Persian. And in Sanskrit, as in most classical languages, most words are derived from a stem or root.

The word *adhyatma* is a compound of the prefix *adhi* and the word *atma*. The word *atma* is a shortened form of the word *atman*, which is derived variously from *an*, to breathe; *at*, to move; and *va*, to blow. The word *atman* means the soul, principle of life and sensation, the individual soul, indwelling entity, self, abstract individual, the body, the person or whole body considered as one and opposed to the separate parts of the body, intellect, mind, the highest personal principle of life, Brahman, effort, the sun, fire, and a son. The prefix *adhi* is added to verbs and nouns and means above, over and above, and besides. It could also be a separate adverb or preposition and could also mean over, from above, from, from the presence of, after, for, instead of, over, on, at, in comparison with, over, upon, and concerning. The word *adhyatma* means concerning the *atma* or Atman, the supreme Spirit, own, belonging to self, concerning self or individual personality. It could also mean the discerning faculty that distinguishes the Real from the unreal. It also means spirituality or the

discipline that leads to the realisation of one's true nature.

*Adhyatma* means the nature of the individual self or self-hood, which is the presence of the supreme reality Brahman in every body as the indwelling Self. It means the entity which as the indwelling Self, exists in the body, *atma*, by making the body its place of dwelling, *adhibhautika*, and which in the ultimate analysis is the supreme Brahman. *Adhyatma* is also the discipline of knowledge that leads to spiritual wisdom and eventually to moksha or liberation. It is considered to be the best kind of knowledge. This knowledge is *adhyatma*, pertains to the Self, and deals with the discernment between the Self and the non-Self. *Adhyatma* is the knowledge concerning Atman and the path to be adopted in order to attain the knowledge of Atman. This knowledge is considered to be eternal. *Adhyatma* also refers to the exposition or explanation about the nature of the supreme reality, Brahman. One's leanings towards the study of scriptures and one's effort to understand one's true nature, Atman, is also called *adhyatma*. It also means complete surrender to God with total abnegation of the ego.

Anything that is related to one's self, that is one's body, mind, vital energy, is also called *adhyatma*. It also denotes suffering created in oneself that arises in one's body and mind, and is one of the three kinds of suffering a living being can get, the other two being *adhibhautika*, that created by other living beings; and *adhidhaivika*, that created by natural or cosmic forces.

# TRADITIONAL TALES

## *The Miracle That Brought Faith*

(Continued from the previous issue)

**S**RI KRISHNA: 'Will you kill us now? Will you snatch our ornaments? Only if you promise not to, will we see you daily.' Robber: 'I promise you a million times that I will never kill you. Who can kill you? All abilities of one, who even thinks of killing you, would vanish.' Sri Krishna: 'Will you accept our ornaments?' Robber: 'Ornaments? I no more have the desire for anything.' Sri Krishna: 'Why so? We are giving them willingly; accept them.' Robber: 'I have to accept them if you give them willingly. But what if your parents get angry at you? What if they beat you?' Sri Krishna: 'No, nothing of that sort will happen. We are princes. We have many more such ornaments. If you want, we can give you more.' Robber: 'No. What would I do with these ornaments? But, I should not reject what you give. Tell me the truth, do you have more ornaments?' Sri Krishna: 'Would we give these ornaments if we did not have more of them? Come, take these.'



Sri Krishna started removing the ornaments from his body. The robber said: 'Brother, if you want to give these ornaments, tie them in my upper cloth wrapper and give it to me. However, be sure of this; if you are not willing to give them away, don't give them. All I desire is to see your beautiful face and to keep my head on your holy feet.'

Sri Krishna: 'Why do you say so? We are giving these ornaments willingly. Come next time; we will give you more.' Saying these words, Sri Krishna tied all the ornaments in the robber's upper cloth wrapper and gave it to him. Taking it, the robber said: 'Brother! It is alright even if you don't give the ornaments; please do give your darshan.' Sri Krishna said: 'Have both! We will give you ornaments and darshan.' The robber proceeded to his home with the ornaments. On the way, his mind was swimming in an ocean of joy.

The next night the robber met the Bhagavata pandit. He told him everything about the

two boys, kept the bundle of ornaments in front of him, and said: 'O pandit! See how many ornaments I have brought! You can take as much as you want.' The pandit was dumbstruck. His eyes widened in amazement. He thought: 'The robber has brought all the ornaments that I had described in my Bhagavata recital. Is this a dream or reality? No, this is indeed real! The same ornaments! The same flute! There is no doubt. They are definitely the ornaments of Lord Sri Krishna. Yogis fast and keep vigil and practise austerities for thousands of years to see the supreme person and yet they are unable to get the Lord's darshan. And how did this robber see the Lord? Surprising! Wonderful!' Then the pandit asked: 'Brother, can you show me Sri Krishna?' The robber replied: 'Why do you ask thus? Come with me tomorrow itself. I will show him.'

The pandit was not convinced. Yet, he went with the robber for verifying what he had said. They crossed the forest, river, small hillock, and a fig tree. The night was over and the dawn was coming. The robber said: 'O pandit! You are a stranger to them and those boys may get frightened on seeing you and might run away. So, please hide behind that tree.' It was dawn. The sweet melody of the flute was heard. The robber jumped in joy: 'O pandit! Did you hear? The flute is playing. The boys are coming.'

'Where? I cannot hear anything,' said the pandit. 'What? Can't you hear? Just stay here. Let me go and see where they are now,' saying thus, the robber climbed to the top of the tree. 'O pandit! There, those boys are coming. The divine brilliance radiating from their bodies has spread all over.' The robber said in excitement and climbed down the tree as quickly as he climbed up.

'I cannot see anything,' said the pandit in

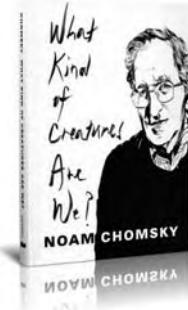
dismay. 'What? You can see the forest, the hillock, and the fig tree, but can't you see the boys?' asked the robber in amazement. The pandit said: 'If you truly see Sri Krishna, tell him: "Give the ornaments to this brahmana instead." By then, Sri Krishna and Balarama had come near the robber. The robber eagerly said: 'Come, come, children! Do you know how long I have been waiting for you?' Sri Krishna smilingly asked: 'Do you want ornaments?' The robber said: 'No, I don't want the ornaments. I want to return the ones you gave me earlier. I see you, talk to you, but this pandit cannot see you. He refuses to believe me. That is why I brought him with me. Reveal yourself to him. Only then will he believe me.'

Sri Krishna said: 'Dear friend, this pandit is well-versed in the scriptures and can expound them well. He is aged and performs his regular duties diligently. All that is alright but he does not have faith and conviction like you. Therefore, he does not deserve to see me.' Robber: 'I don't know all that. You have to reveal yourself to him. Else, I will fall at your feet now and give up my life.' Sri Krishna: 'Alright, do as I say. Hold mine and the pandit's hands.' The robber immediately grabbed their hands. What a wonder! The pandit's inner eye opened! The pandit saw Sri Krishna playing the flute with his all-bewitching smile. The robber and the pandit fell at his feet. God is a wish-fulfilling tree; he fulfils the devotees' desires. He reveals him to some; denies his vision to many. That is his divine play. But, a devotee with faith's eyes sees God in the desired form. God has no distinctions of robber and pandit. All God wants is a devoted mind with unshakeable faith. Love, is what God desires. If we have unshakeable faith in God like the great devotee, the robber, is there any doubt that we would see God even with these mortal eyes?



# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



## **What Kind of Creatures Are We?**

Noam Chomsky

Columbia University Press, 61 West 62 Street, New York, NY 10023, USA. [www.cup.columbia.edu](http://www.cup.columbia.edu). 2016. \$19.95. xxiv + 167 pp. HB. ISBN 9780231175968.

Noam Chomsky is undoubtedly one of the brilliant polyglots produced in the last century, who continues to engage critically with various issues that bother us today. In the masterly foreword to this book Akeel Bilgrami, a thinker and linguist, explains that this book is 'a lifetime of reflection by a scientist of language' (vii). It is divided into four chapters, 'What is Language?', 'What Can We Understand?', 'What is the Common Good?', and 'The Mysteries of Nature: How Deeply Hidden?'. Through these questions Chomsky intends to get a clarity about and hopes for the answer to the question that forms the name of this book: 'What Kind of Creatures Are We?'. These fundamental questions 'cover an impressive range of fields: theoretical linguistics, cognitive science, philosophy of science, history of science, evolutionary biology, metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, the philosophy of language and mind, moral and political philosophy, and, even briefly, the ideal of human education' (ibid.).

A review of a book of this kind should necessarily be aphoristic, as the book itself is, since the sheer vastness of the ideas covered can only be called a unique kind of mind-map of a genius. As Bilgrami puts it: 'To summarize a book whose intellectual complexity and power and whose breadth of knowledge and originality cannot possibly be captured in a summary—so, an exercise and duty that may not, in the end, aid the reader at all' (xxiv).

Chomsky begins this book with a hope of finding some insights, new and possibly old, into the nature of human existence. He sets out in a search for insights that could 'clear away some of the obstacles that hamper further inquiry' (1). His questioning is specific: 'What is language? What are the limits of human understanding (if any)? And what is the common good to which we should strive?' (ibid.). Citing recent scientific research, Chomsky considers language to be the one aspect of human life that is crucial to 'understanding our modern selves' (3). This book is a summary of Chomsky's research for half a century, primarily in the field of linguistics, of which he is almost the founder, at least of its modern avatar. The innocuous-sounding task of wading through this deceptively simple and short volume would itself require in-depth knowledge of numerous disciplines and this is where Chomsky scores admirably: He presents all this wisdom in a clear and succinct language so much so that the ordinary reader is encouraged to believe that understanding Chomsky is not so difficult after all—obviously a foolhardy conclusion.

This work is elemental; it touches and hints at some fundamental thoughts at the pivot of our existence and it invites the reader to pursue detailed studies of linguistics, hermeneutics, ethics, and metaphysics. Chomsky often speaks the mind of the readers. He questions the assumptions underlying the formation and development of a language and its structure. It is high time we turn to minimalist strategies for the development of a language. Talking about ethics or the common good, Chomsky in the third chapter of this book questions the intentions of the US constitution and affirms that 'scholarship generally agrees that "the Constitution was intrinsically an aristocratic document designed to check the democratic tendencies of the period"' (78). Chomsky's anarchist leanings are clear when he says that 'anarchism

is the inheritor of the classical liberal ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment' (63).

The concept of a thing is a much discussed topic in linguistics. Chomsky points to a frequent lack of this concept. He explains this with the help of two nouns, 'fly' and 'flaw'. This analysis of 'thinghood' brings to the reader Chomsky's effortless way of presenting most complex ideas. This volume could on many counts be considered to be a history of ideas, at least in the disciplines of language, meaning, and philosophy. The timeline that Chomsky chooses to analyse is a momentous one and one can almost see the formation of Chomsky's mind through these decades. Chomsky's attempt to be inconclusive and yet leave pointers to various conclusions is hard to miss and it makes this book an inquiry in multiple layers that is in many ways, cyclical. To the question 'What Kind of Creatures Are We?', Chomsky does not have an answer; he does not want to have an answer, his aim seems to just raise the question and make it clear to the reader that in finding answers to this question, we are no better than our ancestors of several centuries ago. It is this candid humility that sets apart Chomsky in the galaxy of thinkers of the last and the present century and not his scholarly accomplishments alone. Expression, meaning, intent, and truth are what this book is all about and Chomsky artfully weaves a tapestry of these ideas, situates them in the human mind, and finally rejects the very need for that mind.

The striking feature of this book is Chomsky's deliberations in the fourth chapter, where he reveals a metaphysical side to him. In a brief but sweeping survey of thought that tries to understand nature, Chomsky starts from Isaac Newton and analyses John Locke. He considers the mind-problem conundrum to be redundant and proposes instead the 'knowledge intuition/argument' problem as the focal question of the natural sciences (103). This Chomsky bases upon the disillusionment with classical approaches: 'Classical interpretations having vanished, the notions of body, material, physical are hardly more than honorific designations for what is more or less understood at some particular moment in time, with flexible boundaries and no guarantee that there

will not be radical revision ahead, even at its core' (102). I would like to see this as a metaphysical approach because Chomsky prompts me to such thought: 'Being reflective creatures, unlike others, we go on to seek to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of experience. These exercises are called myth, or magic, or philosophy, or science' (103). For someone who has practically scripted the modern discourse on language and meaning, Chomsky takes a radical turn in this chapter to intuition and the realm beyond thought. It could be the result of his octogenarian experience as he is intrigued that what he hears 'as noise is perceived as music by' his 'teenage grandchildren' (ibid.). Chomsky declares that 'there is no objective science from a third-person perspective, just various first-person perspectives' (104).

Chomsky also draws the attention of the reader to 'lesser grades of mystery' like the 'evolution of ... cognitive capacities' in humans (125). Further, he cites the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin and concludes that it is almost impossible to learn about this evolution because of lack of evidence.

When the majority of the thinking world is toying with various and newer readings of quantum physics, Chomsky brings an interesting focus on Newtonian thought. He argues that a shift to Newton, at least in the paradigm of thought, would lead to a complete redundancy of the mind-body problem, though he is concerned with the objection that it invokes 'an unacceptable form of "radical emergence", unlike the emergence of liquids from molecules' (115).

Part of the *Columbia Themes in Philosophy* series and adapted from the Dewey lectures that Chomsky delivered in the Columbia University in 2013, this book does raise some basic questions of philosophy. Chomsky questions the very process of understanding and points out that it might have limits and regrets that this fact 'is sometimes thoughtlessly derided as "mysterianism"' (104). A reference for all interested in Chomsky and a guidepost for thinkers, this volume should find a place in the bookshelf of anyone interested in human nature.

*Editor*

Prabuddha Bharata

# MANANA

**Exploring thought-currents from around the world.  
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## ***Midlife: A Philosophical Guide***

Kieran Setiya

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. 2017. 186 pp. \$22.95. HB. ISBN 9780691173931.



HERE IS A TALE of two great rabbis in the first century BCE. Shammai is strict, doctrinal, exclusive. His rival, Hillel, is just the opposite: humane, flexible, open. The story tells of a gentile who agrees to convert to Judaism on condition of being taught the Torah while standing on one foot. Dismissed with contempt by Shammai, the gentile comes to Hillel, who accepts him, saying, 'That which is hateful unto you, do not do unto your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Now, go study.'

This book is written in the spirit of Hillel, whose words form its epigraph. Like the Talmud, philosophy can be forbidding and esoteric. This is nothing new: try reading Kant or Aristotle. Nor is it all bad. Hillel does not dismiss the more exacting forms of scholarship: he ends with the injunction to study. But he believes that the message of Judaism can be communicated simply and that it matters enough to be worth trying even at the risk of seeming naïve.

That is what I believe about philosophy. It could not survive without philosophers whose commitment to answering the most recalcitrant questions leads them into difficulty. But for all its disputes, uncertainties, and complications, academic philosophy has much to offer almost

anyone in the midst of living, and wondering how to live, a human life.

My investment in this idea is personal, and not just because I teach philosophy for a living. I started thinking about midlife about six years ago, at the tender age of thirty-five. On the surface, life was going well. I had a stable family and career. I was a tenured professor in a good department housed in a congenial Midwestern city. I knew I was lucky to be doing what I loved. And yet there was something hollow in the prospect of doing more of it, in the projected sequence of accomplishments stretching through the future to retirement, decline, and death. When I paused to contemplate the life I had worked so hard to build, I felt a disconcerting mixture of nostalgia, regret, claustrophobia, emptiness, and fear. Was I having a midlife crisis?

You may protest that I was (and am?) too young for a midlife crisis. I appreciate the thought, though you should brace yourself for chapter 2. And in the end, I don't agree. What floored me were the existential questions of midlife, questions you are not too young to ask at thirty-five. You could ask them at twenty or at seventy, though I think they are especially salient when you reach my age. They are questions of loss and regret, success and failure, the lives you wanted and the life you have. They are

questions of morality and finitude, of emptiness in the pursuits of projects, whatever they are. Ultimately, they are questions about the temporal structure of human life and the activities that occupy it. This is a book not just for the middle-aged but for anyone coping with the irreversibility of time.

It is a work of applied philosophy: philosophical reflection trained on the challenges of midlife. And it takes the form of a self-help guide. The trials of middle age have been neglected by philosophers, but they are amenable to therapy by the tools philosophers use. Until around the eighteenth century, there was no sharp line between moral philosophy and self-help. Philosophers agreed that contemplation of the good life should make our own lives better. When they do, they mostly invoke the classics, often the Roman Stoics, Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus, as though philosophy lost its relevance to life two thousand years ago. My approach is not historical. Though I mention past philosophers, ancient and modern, I do not treat them as sage-like repositories of wisdom but as interlocutors in working through the issues for myself—and, I hope, for you.

This book differs from standard self-help in part because it is more concerned with basic questions of how to feel about your life, in part because it is less concerned with outward change. For most of us, midlife is not too late to start something new, though it often feels that way. Don't be fooled by the foreshortening of time that accompanies middle age. You have more time than you think. That said, there are other books to consult for practical advice about career change at fifty or being single at forty-five. That is not the sort of advice I will give. But I will attempt to give advice, to communicate strategies for adapting to midlife inspired by philosophical ideas. Where the advice is familiar, I will explore

the philosophy behind it. Where it is unfamiliar, I will argue that it is right.

In doing so, I assume no prior knowledge. I have tried to write a book that can be read while standing on one foot: technicalities are suppressed and I opt for brevity over completeness. The chapters that follow address what are, in effect, just some of the many midlife crises. There is the sense that life is too demanding, too consumed with needs, which is the focus of chapter 2. In resolving it, we will explore conceptions of reason, value, and the good life that owe their origin to Aristotle, and we will learn the importance of doing what you need not do. There is the sense of confinement in one's present life, however happy it may be, the acknowledgement of lost alternatives, which is the subject of chapter 3. We will learn how options are overrated and why there is something good about missing out. There is the sense of an imperfect, unchangeable past with which you must come to terms, in chapter 4. We will learn when and why you should be glad you made a mistake. There is the sense of time passed by, or running out, awareness of mortality, in chapter 5. We will engage with philosophical treatments for fear of death. And there is the sense of repetition and exhaustion in the succession of projects, day by day, and year by year, which is the subject of chapter 6. We will learn what it would mean to live in the present, how it could solve your midlife crisis, and why meditation helps.

Before we look for answers, we begin, in chapter 1, with a history of the question. We will investigate the stereotype of midlife as a time of crisis, unearthing its recent past. We will map its shifting present, its evolution from dizzying trauma to manageable malaise. Contemporary philosophers have paid too little mind to aging, to the physical and temporal situations of childhood, midlife, and old age. It is time for that to change. 

# REPORTS



Kalaripayattu competition at Coimbatore Mission Vidyalaya

## Celebration of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Sister Nivedita

The following centres held the programmes mentioned against their names: **Antpur**: A women's convention on 9 February 2018 in which around 100 women participated. **Asansol**: A values education programme for parents on 11 February attended by 1,150 people. **Coimbatore Mission Vidyalaya**: (i) A state-level yoga and *Kalaripayattu*, a martial art, competition on 31 January attended by 661 students from 35 schools, (ii) An international conference on the Greatness of India on 3 and 4 February attended by 573 people, and (iii) A procession, a public meeting, and a debate on 7 February attended by about 2,500 people. **Contai**: A devotees' convention on 2 January attended by 250 people. **Hyderabad**: A youths' camp on 24 February attended by 170 youths. **Malda**: A youths' convention on 18 February in which 350 people took part. **Malliankaranai**: Speeches and film shows on Sister Nivedita at three schools and an ITI between 19 and 27 February. In all, 614 students attended the programmes. **Mangaluru**: A programme on women empowerment on 10 February which was attended by about 650 women studying in various colleges. **Medinipur**: A students' convention on 19 February attended by 450 students. **Rajamahendravaram**: (i) A youths' convention on 9 February attended by 1,540 students from different colleges, (ii) A convention for professionals on 10 February attended by 620 people, and (iii) A devotees' convention on 11 February attended by 820 people. **Ramharipur**: A students' convention on 23 February which was attended by nearly 600 students from 23 schools. **Salem**: A programme consisting of meditation, lectures and yogasanas at the Salem central prison

on 21 January in which 150 inmates took part. **Silchar**: Talks on 21 and 22 February which were attended by about 400 people. **Swamiji's Ancestral House**: Four lectures in and around Kolkata between 24 January and 20 February which were attended by 2,800 people in all.

## News of Branch Centres

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ranchi Morabadi** held a *kisan mela*, farmers' fair, on 1 and 2 February. Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Raghubar Das; Jharkhand Minister for Agriculture, Randhir Kumar Singh; and a few officers from the Jharkhand Government, among others, attended the concluding programme. The fair was visited by about 16,000 farmers.

**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Garbeta** concluded its year-long centenary celebrations through a youths' convention on 16 February attended by 850 youths.

Sri Tathagata Roy, Governor of Tripura, visited Dhaleswar sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar, Agartala** on 18 February.

Swami Suvirananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the generic medicine store at **Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan, Kolkata** on 23 February.

Eight students of class 11 of the school of **Ramakrishna Mission Boys' Home, Rahara**, who had participated in the Junior Scholarship Test 2017 conducted by the Jagadish Bose National Science Talent Search in Kolkata, were awarded junior scholarships, and another student received a junior encouragement award. The school also won the second prize in the competition.

### ***Swachchha Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign)***

**Coimbatore Mission Vidyalaya** conducted four cleaning drives on 5, 9, 13, and 15 February in which the Vidyalaya students cleaned a public road and the premises of a school, a temple, and a government office.

**Karimganj** centre cleaned two public places in the city on 19 February.

**Mangaluru** Ashrama, in February, conducted: (i) four cleanliness drives in Mangaluru, (ii) a campaign in which 1,050 volunteers visited nearly 2,200 households in Mangaluru and spread awareness about cleanliness, (iii) cleanliness drives at 68 villages in Dakshina Kannada District, (iv) workshops on cleanliness in 110 schools covering nearly 11,000 students, and (v) a day-long training for 550 students of 108 schools on 9 February empowering them to become ambassadors for cleanliness in their respective schools and localities.

### ***Relief***

**Cyclone Relief: Kerala: Cyclone Ockhi:** In the second phase of the relief operations, Thiruvananthapuram centre distributed 1,650 kg rice, 164 kg dal, 165 kg salt, 17 kg dry chillies, 165 coconuts, 83 kg edible oil, 17 kg tea leaves, and 83 kg sugar among 165 affected families in Thiruvananthapuram district on 31 December. **West Bengal: Naora** centre distributed 201 tarpaulins on 23 November and 21 December among the people affected by a recent cyclone.

**Winter Relief:** The Headquarters and the centres mentioned below distributed blankets and various winter wear: **India: Bagda:** 300 blankets from 23 to 26 December; **Baghbazar:** 400 blankets and 14 sweaters on 31 December; **Belgharia:** 300 blankets and 4,231 sweaters from 15 November to 22 December, **Bamunmura:** 180 jackets from 27 to 31 December; **Baranagar Mission:** 100 blankets and 804 sweaters from 25 December to 8 January;

**Chandipur:** 51 blankets on 1 January; **Chapra:** 700 blankets and 4,457 sweaters from 26 October to 10 January; **Cooch Behar:** 150 blankets on 14 January; **Deoghar:** 300 blankets on 28 and 30 December; **Gadadhar Ashrama:** 250 blankets from 17 November to 17 December; **Ghatshila:** 250 blankets from 26 November to 10 December; **Guwahati:** 436 blankets from 1 to 14 January; **Hatamuniguda:** 400 blankets on 28 December; **Headquarters:** 300 blankets, 120 jackets, and 100 *chaddars*, upper-body wrappers, from 15 November to 20 December, **Jaipur:** 300 blankets on 14 and 17 December; **Jammu:** 193 blankets from 30 November to 31 December; **Kamarpukur:** 2,194 blankets from 13 November to 27 December; **Kankhal:** 3,000 blankets, 3,000 pairs of socks, and 3,000 caps on 11 January; **Kankurgachhi:** 381 blankets on 10 January. **Lucknow:** 1,000 blankets, 8,974 sweaters, and 5,303 jackets from 2 to 22 January; **Medinipur:** 600 blankets, 677 sweaters, 1,134 jackets, and 169 sweatshirts from 20 November to 28 December; **Naora:** 464 blankets on 7 and 24 December; **Narottam Nagar:** 800 jackets from 30 December to 25 January; **Puri Math:** 700 blankets from 4 November to 25 December; **Rahara:** 1,447 blankets from 17 December to 23 January, **Rajarhat Bishnupur:** 500 blankets from 22 November to 31 December; **Ramharipur:** 100 blankets on 12 January; **Ranchi Morabadi:** 400 blankets from 10 November to 6 December; **Sargachhi:** 300 blankets and 2,471 sweaters from 15 September to 20 December; **Seva Pratisthan, Kolkata:** 180 blankets from 10 to 16 January; **Silchar:** 1,090 blankets and 582 sweaters from 11 November to 22 December; **Sinthi, Kolkata:** 100 blankets from 8 to 12 January; **Srinagar:** 300 blankets from 31 October to 26 November; **Taki:** 300 blankets from 26 December to 13 January; **Vrindaban:** 550 blankets from 2 to 16 January. **Bangladesh: Chandpur:** 60 blankets on 4 and 17 January; **Chittagong:** 100 blankets on 13 January.

# Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama

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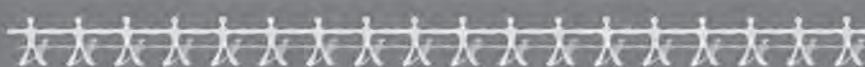
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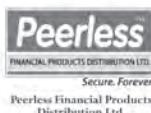
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*Swami Vivekananda*

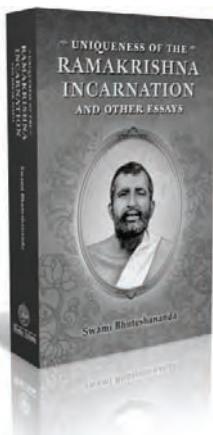
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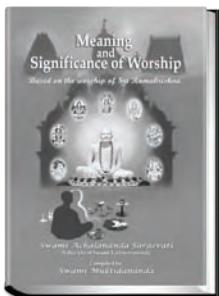


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